

Kindred Spirits

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Summary: ...Quistis faces a threat from her past, one she can't quite recall...

1. Prolouge

> <meta name="Generator"> Kindred Spirits

Kindred Spirits

Prologue:

The engineers from Esthar had rebuilt the complex that surrounded the main facility of Balamb Garden by following, rather slavishly, the original plans drawn up for the Garden years ago. As a result, most of the secret places that the student body had discovered over the years had not changed, and so a SeeD who had graduated, say, five years ago could go to one of the private spots that he or she had gone to to hide from the faculty after curfew and still find cadets using it for the same purpose. So while a few things had changed—quite a few underclassmen found themselves being sent down to the MD levels looking for some unlikely destination—some of the old standards still held. Quistis Treppe found herself somewhat comforted by the fact that cadets still used her favorite "secret place" at the rear of the Training Center the one some cadets called the Nest. She had once heard that the little balcony that overlooked the central Garden complex was actually meant for the maintenance staff to use to maintain the air handling units behind her. Looking at the young couple at the far end of the space, standing so close to each other that a molecule would have a hard time getting between them, Quistis doubted that they cared about why it was there. She leaned against the retaining wall and gazed out at the central complex of Balamb Garden, bathed in the light of the inert thruster ring. When the Garden was in flight, the ring propelled the unlikely airship; when it was at rest, as it had been since the end of the Third Sorceress War, it hung over the Garden like a giant halo. _Why would anyone build something so large and yet make it flight capable? _she

thought, not for the first time. Presumably, all the Gardens could double as aircraft; Galbadia Garden had demonstrated such capability during the War. It just was not something that leaped readily to her mind as being a thing that would come up during the design of the Garden Still, it was undeniably useful, even in this day and age, when most SeeDs were air-lifted to combat zones aboard the _Ragnarok. _Quistis put matters of engineering and combat logistics out of her mind and thought about why she was here, alone, surrounded by a group of teens who had to be confused by why she was here, alone. Inside the Garden, the cadets of the first class that she had taught since becoming Head Instructor were attending their inauguration party, but for some reason, she felt more comfortable here, alone.

She had been removed as an Instructor shortly before the War had flared up, her superiors citing a lack of maturity and a tendency to be too lenient on her students. She had been only seventeen when she had received her license, teaching in some cases cadets who were her age or not all that much younger. Quistis had not quite seen it quite that way, and her removal had nagged at her during the War. While she had played an important role in the victory over the sorceress Ultimecia, she had found that she had wanted her former role back. In losing what she had taken for granted, she had gained a new appreciation for being a teacher, and had fought to reclaim her license. With Squall Leonhart serving as the Combat Master for Balamb Garden, that should have been easy-they were, after all, life-long friends-but Squall had not been so easy to sway. _Prove to me that they were wrong about you, Quistis, _ Squall had said. She believed, hoped actually, that Squall had been so hard on her to prevent anyone from saying that he had favored her. She had made it a moot point, performing so well that Squall had not been able to deny her. She had returned to being Instructor Treppe, and she had found so much of her former life repeating itself that she had expected Squall and Cid Kramer to remove her as Instructor again. The Garden grapevine had kept her fan club, for lack of a better term, alive, and it had turned her exploits during the War into myth. _No matter what happens, I suppose that there will always be "Trepies."_ She did not know if that was a good or a bad thing.

She heard footsteps behind her and for one irrational moment she thought it was Squall, who she had brought here the day he had become a SeeD and she had lost her license. She had thought that she had wanted to talk to someone about her problems, when in actuality, she had been trying to get him to notice her as something other than his teacher. She had thought that she was in love with Squall, until she had recalled that she had grown up with Squall at Edea's orphanage, serving as sort of a surrogate sister for him. Or at least that was what she told herself. Sometimes, seeing Squall with Rinoa Heartilly, the two of them so in love it irritated cynics for miles, she wondered how true that was. The fact was, with her memories stolen by the effect of junctioning Guardian Forces, she had good reason to doubt anything she felt based on her childhood feelings. _And that does not change the fact that someone is standing behind you, Quistis_. She turned to address whomever had come to bother her and found herself rather surprised to see the best student of her current class, Eric Alfredsson, standing there in his duty SeeD uniform. What was so surprising was the fact that she barely knew her student-she had often thought that she had not so much taught Eric as refined him-and of her current lot of students, he was about the last she would have expected to find her here.

Eric Alfredsson stood five foot eight and weighed maybe one hundred and forty-five pounds soaking wet. He certainly did not look like a warrior of any kind; he was slender in build, blessed with the kind of boyish good looks that most seventeen year olds would kill for. He wore his brown hair cut short in the back, long in the front so it fell over his right eye, and perhaps half the females of the cadet corps found him to be perfectly beautiful. Quistis had read more than one posting to Balamb Garden's internet chat rooms describing Eric in terms that would probably cause Eric to blush if ever read them. Assuming that Eric ever blushed: Quistis had never met anyone so levelheaded in her life. He never got angry or upset, and for that matter he never seemed to joke with anyone. Eric's appearance masked a very competent fighter, perhaps the best since Squall and Seifer Almsy had gone through Garden. Slung over his back was his preferred weapon, an ornate broadsword with hilts shaped like angel wings; being armed in one of the private places at Balamb Garden seemed odd to outsiders, until you discovered that the Training Center was stocked with live and deadly monsters. Quistis had her preferred weapon, the chain whip called Save the Queen, on her hip. She noticed that the three other couples that shared the balcony were looking their way, probably starting rumors as they watched. "Shouldn't you be at the party, Eric?" she asked. "Might be the last time you get to have fun before they start giving you missions."

"I don't party well, ma'am," he told her, his voice level and polite. "The Combat Master said that you would probably be here. Said that you came here after the last inauguration party."

"Did he now? I'm amazed that Squall remembers that. He met Rinoa that night." She turned to face the night again. "You probably should be at the party, Eric. Could meet the girl of your dreams."

"I'm not Squall, ma'am." Which was a particularly eloquent response, she had to admit. "Actually, I came here to thank you."

Well, that's odd, Quistis thought. "Thank me for what?"

Eric was quiet for a moment, clearly searching for the right way to say what was on his mind. It occurred to Quistis that this was the most casual conversation she had ever had with Eric. Other than answering questions in class or communications during combat drills, Eric had rarely spoken to her. After what felt like an eternity, Eric said "I'd like to thank you for putting up with Aiko, ma'am."

Oh, now I get it. Quistis understood what had motivated Eric to speak to her on the day that he had passed the SeeD field exam, achieving a Level Ten ranking, the highest since, well, she had graduated. If Eric was the finest student of her current class, then Aiko Hayashibara was the most irritating. There was nothing wrong with her capabilities-in terms of raw talent, only Eric surpassed her. But Aiko was the walking dictionary definition of attitude, a wild, authority figure defying practical joker of the highest order. Aiko did not short sheet beds: she cast Sleep spells on her victims and, aided by whatever underclassmen that she could wrangle into helping her, would deposit her target miles from the Garden. She was like a force of nature that Quistis could not claim to have tamed, only directed positively. The most unusual thing about Aiko, though, was that she and Eric were fast friends; they had been since both had arrived at Galbadia Garden years ago and had stayed that way after coming to Balamb after the War had ended. Most of the men at the

Garden, seeing the boyishly handsome Eric and the exotically beautiful Aiko together, assumed that they were more than just friends. As far as Quistis knew, however, that was the case. She admired Aiko for that if nothing else. "Putting up with Aiko is part of my job, Eric. I knew there was a good SeeD somewhere in there. Just had to find her."

"I just wanted to let you know it was appreciated. Aiko can be hard to handle, and I would like to express my admiration." Eric stepped up to the railing and studied the scene. "Nice view. Um, you know, ma'am, this isn't normally a place that you come alone."

"I like it here. And, Eric, you're a SeeD now. You don't need to be so formal. You can call me by my name."

"Old habits die hard, ma'am, er, Quistis." He looked down over the railing. "Do you come here often?"

Quistis smiled. "That sounded dangerously like a pick up line, Eric. I'd scold you if I didn't know you were so formal."

"Thanks for the benefit of the doubt." Most seventeen year old men, standing next to a beautiful twenty year old woman, would be breaking out in a sweat. Eric seemed to be handling it well. "So, do you come here often?"

Persistent fellow, she decided. "I used to, when I was a cadet. I roomed with a girl that was a bit of a wild child, she told me about this place. She would come here with boys and smoke cigarettes. Aiko would have liked her."

(Aileen her name was Aileen and it rained on the day they buried her)

Quistis scowled, knowing that Eric would notice and not caring. How long had it been since she had thought about Aileen Navarre? Months? Heaven forbid, years? She put it behind her and moved on. "I would sneak out here with her and she would try to talk me into smoking and we would talk about guys and, you know€|" Eric nodded.

(crouching against the air handlers on the other side of the balcony, tears streaking her face/ a promise to always honor her memory)

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This time Quistis shuddered uncontrollably, drawing a comment from Eric. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"I'm-I'm fine. It's been a while since I thought about Aileen. She was killed on a mission, years ago."

"My condolences," Eric said with his usual politeness.

"Like I said, it was a long time ago. I wasn't even an Instructor yet-

(fifteen you were fifteen and you were so scared)_

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-and I wasn't even there, anyway."

Eric stepped back from her, his bearing formal. "I had better get going, Quistis. Aiko is in all likelihood raising some sort of hell. It's her nature."

Quistis had to agree with that. Part of her longed for his company, not out of any attraction to him, although he was very good looking, but simply because she did not want to be alone. She had felt the same way the night that she had brought Squall here, thankful in a way that she had lost her Instructor's license because it had given her an excuse, come to think of it. "You take care of yourself, Eric. And congratulations on becoming a Seed."

Eric bowed his head at her in a curt, proper gesture and left. Once he was out of sight, Quistis wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stop the sudden shiver that ran through her body. _What's wrong with me? Why don't I want to be alone on this night? And why am I so scared? What did I forget?_

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A girl, across the balcony, giggled, and just like that the spell was broken. Quistis looked up at the sky and said to herself " A goose just walked over my grave." She decided that it was time to put on an appearance at the party and see if she could do any preemptive damage control about her conversation with Eric. By the time she had left the Training Center, she had put the incident on the balcony out of her mind.

On the edge of a forest in the Alcauld Plains, a few miles away from Balamb Garden, a slim, shadowy figure knelt, eyes on the skies. "Oh, Quistis," it whispered, "I'm coming home."

2. Voices

> <meta name="Generator"> Part One: Swallowed (Working Title)

Kindred Spirits Part One: Voices

The sound of rain pattering against the window brought Quistis from a sleep best described as troubled.

It was a hard rain, the kind Quistis associated with the harsh storms that besieged Balamb Garden in the winter, the wind howling around the superstructure of the main complex. It was not odd for this kind of storm to strike during the late spring as this one had, rare, admittedly, but not odd. Quistis lay on her back, looking up at the familiar ceiling of her quarters, and listened to the rain lash the glass. For a rare change of pace, she did not want to get out of bed, even though her duties, other than the after-action report with those who had taken the field exam, were mostly administrative today. She had known a few people in her time that had suffered from slow-sleep insomnia, where you found it hard to sleep and sometimes had nights where your sleep was so light that you thought you had lain awake all night. That described the night that she had just gone through; she could swear that she had watched the digital clock on her night stand

pass the top of every hour, and there was no comfort to be had. She reached over and plucked the clock from its place and saw it read 5:24. "Six minutes early," she grumbled, putting the clock back and covering her eyes with an arm. "Come on, Quisty, get up," she said to herself. "Things could be worse. They might have recycled Aiko." That was enough of a good thing to get her moving, relatively speaking. She by-passed her normal morning routine of first checking her messages on the Garden net (Cid was notorious for thinking of something he needed to pass on to the faculty at all hours of the night and firing off an e-mail at three in the morning) and instead headed for the shower. _If that doesn't wake me up, I can always try the coffee in the faculty cafeteria. That would wake the dead._

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The shower did not quite do its job, as when she got out she felt half dead. Given that she had felt fully dead a few minutes ago, however, she supposed it was an improvement. She wrapped a towel around herself and studied her reflection in the mirror above the sink; she had seen worse. She was about to start drying her hair, her mind already turning to the after-action report and how she would use it to teach the candidates that had failed the field exam, when a cheerful ringing tone came from her bedroom. Quistis thought a few dark thoughts as she went to the night stand and picked up the palm-top that every member of the faculty had been given recently. She saw from the message icon blinking on the screen, a terribly cute flower, who was calling, and wondered what was up. She touched the icon and said "Hello, Selphie."

"Hiya, Quistis," the constantly energetic Selphie Tilmitt cried. _I should count my blessings, _Quistis thought. _She could have said "booyaka" again._ "You have been a very, very naughty girl." Selphie added.

"I beg your pardon?" Quistis sat down on the edge of the bed. "Do you mind telling me what I did that was so naughty?"

If Quistis knew Selphie, then the girl was grinning ear to ear. Nothing seemed to get her down for very long. She had only recently returned to Balamb, having overseen the Esthar effort to rebuild Trabia Garden, and she had returned for a simple reason. Her relationship with Irvine Kinneas had come to a rather sudden end, over something Selphie refused to discuss. She had been depressed about that for nearly a week, the longest time Quistis had ever seen her upset. Since then, though, she had been her normal, hyperactive self, the unofficial queen of Garden spirit and an Instructor as well. Selphie was teaching cadets how to fly the _Ragnarok_, since Cid was negotiating with Laguna Loire to acquire five more of the relatively obsolete aerospace craft. None of this had anything to do with why Selphie had called her. "I heard that a certain Head Instructor was seen at the Nest with a rather delicious former pupil. Come on, give with the details."

Quistis sighed. She had hoped that going back to the inauguration party, when Eric hadn't, would deflect some of the rumours that their presence at a rather legendary make-out point were bound to create. "There aren't any details, Selphie. He just wanted to thank me for putting up with that obnoxious friend of his. Nothing more."

Selphie giggled. "You aren't just saying that to cover up the fact

that he's really there, are you?"

Now that's a leap in logic, Quistis thought. "He had better not be, because I don't see him, and he has an after-action report to give to me in an hour-and if you make a joke about what kind of action, I'll get irked."

"I'm just kidding, Quistis. And a little disappointed. That Eric boy is superfine. Kind of hoped what I heard was true, 'cause it would show you have awesome taste in guys. Too bad. Got to run-I'd guess by the weather that I'm not doing any training flights today. See you later." Selphie logged off before Quistis could ask where she had heard about Eric, not that Quistis really needed to ask. Selphie practically lived on-line, coordinating most of her school-related activities on-line. Probably read something on a message board. I can deal with it, but what about Eric?_ She decided that it was unlikely that Eric would be bothered by something so relatively trivial as that. Not that rumors that a student had started an affair with a woman who, until yesterday, was his teacher would be trivial to most, but Eric was different. The faculty had believed that he and Aiko were lovers; what the cadet corps believed was probably irrelevant to him. Hopefully Selphie would nip this in the bud. Quistis got on with the business of getting prepared for the day, dressing in her uniform-most of the class were still cadets, and she believed in approaching them as their teacher-and her mind drifted away from the restless night she had. She decided to check her e-mail at her workstation in the second floor classroom and set out on her way.

Outside of Quistis' window, the shadow, lithe and limber, reached out and caressed the inch thick pane of glass. "That should get things rolling rather nicely," it hissed, words lost in the wind. "Now things get really interesting."

Kai Hallen was waiting for Quistis in the classroom, working furiously at one of the desk top workstations. Kai was the closest thing to an everyman at Balamb Garden; he was perhaps five foot six inches tall, and weighed perhaps one hundred and thirty pounds. He was pale, almost to the point of being ashen; he wore his hair long not out of fashion, rather out of a lack of concern over his appearance. Kai was not much of a fighter, which he would proudly admit to. However, he was an exceptional magic user and perhaps the best electronics man at Balamb. He was also a devastating Triple Triad player, the best she had ever seen. Upon hearing of the existence of the CC Group, the collective of card players of which Quistis was "King", Kai had decided to go avoid the usual practice of challenging the lower members and had gunned for her. "Your little group needs an Ace," he had said. He had lost the first time, which only raised his intensity. Now they traded victories and cards at such a rate that it was dizzying. "Hello, Quistis," he called without looking up. "Strange things are afoot on the Garden Net."

Quistis sat down at her desk and shook her head. "Are you talking about what I think you are?"

"Unfortunately, I am. It seems some of the "Trepies" dislike me because I have beaten you at cards. Funny how they don't pick on the Combat Master for doing the same thing."

Quistis managed to hide her relief. "They'll get over it. You're a

SeeD now, Kai. You have more important issues to consider." Kai looked up and beamed at her, his pride visible for miles. The skinny geek, the guy who had fainted after a five mile run, was one of only three cadets to pass the field exam, along with Eric and Aiko. "What my students think of you is irrelevant."

"Well, that's true," he admitted. "Now, what they're saying about Eric, that might not be."

"Damn." The grapevine was getting cruel, she thought. She could understand it if some one had seen them, say, kissing passionately or such. This seemed a little out of hand. "There's nothing to it, you know," she replied, hoping she did not sound too defensive.

"I know that. Thing is, most people think that he's with Aiko. They expect there's gonna be a hellacious cat fight between you two."

Oh, that's it. If Eric had been seen with anyone, that would have been enough to start the ball rolling. Watching Aiko was a spectator sport at the Garden; predicting her next move was nearly a tradition with the cadet corps. "Well, we all know nothing will come of that, right?"

Kai nodded as a grouping of cadets, two male, two female, entered the classroom. All were "Trepies", apparently so enamored of her that they had chosen to be recycled so they can stay near their idol. Kai could not resist. "So, when you going to let me win my Eden card back?" he called. The two men glared at him.

Quistis booted up her workstation. " When you earn it back, Kai." She checked her mail-none for a change-and called up her draft report for the field exam mission. As she worked on it, wanting to polish it before she appended her report on the after action session, she found herself dwelling on what had happened with Eric. All she had done was go to her favorite place to be alone

(to honor her memory to never forget what happened)

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_ _and this was the result. It was enough to make a lady rather mad. To act rather unladylike, in fact. She decided that there was no need to waste energy on it and worked on her report as her class drifted in, the usual grumbling about the early hours filling the air. Rather suddenly, the room went silent. She looked up to see Eric walking in and taking his accustomed place beside of Kai. Kai looked over at Eric, who had an expression of absolute calm on his face. "Hi, Eric," he offered. "What's up?"

"Not as much as some people probably think," Eric responded. Quistis could not help but smile at that. _Boy doesn't miss a trick._ The rest of the class returned to their business a moment later, doubtless expecting the main event to come later. She went back to work, noticing that Kai had leaned over to talk to Eric.

"Yes?" Eric said, not looking up at Kai.

"You do have some explaining to do. Why did you follow our rather lovely teacher to the Nest? You could have thanked her later."

Eric was quiet for a moment. Kai did not know Eric as well as Aiko did, which did not mean much; Eric was pretty much a blank slate once you got to know him. So it was no surprise when Eric's answer was a total mystery. "It felt right," he finally said.

Further discussion of the matter was tabled when Aiko Hayshibara entered the room.

Aiko would garner attention if she were the quietest person alive based solely on her looks alone. She was tall, long legged, her slim waist only drawing more attention to a rather ample bosom. Her oval shaped face was dominated by the most exotic almond shaped eyes, which were a shade of violet that Quistis had never seen. Her hair fell down her back in a blue black wave that one of her ardent on-line admirers had described as being genetically engineered for a man to plunge his fingers into. Aiko had reportedly hunted her fan down and had told him "get a life." Aiko's looks were wholly secondary as far as she was concerned; she only used them to torment underclassmen. She would march up to them, square her shoulders back, and bellow "DO YOU LIKE MY CHEST?" at roughly one hundred and twenty decibels. Squall had been forced to get on her about that, Quistis recalled; Aiko had been accidentally traumatizing thirteen year olds. Or so a few had claimed. Aiko scanned the room with her customary impish grin, then strolled over to Quistis' desk and leaned over it. "Yes, Aiko, what is it?" she asked her now former student.

"Just wanted to tell you to be careful. Eric steals the covers."

Quistis had a decent reply for that. "And how do you know that, Aiko?"

Aiko raised a finger to illustrate a point, then lowered her hand and gave up. "You are taking all the fun out of my life," she said, retreating to her desk beside of Eric. "Your girlfriend is getting too used to me," she told him.

"Always said you had a radioactive half life of a few years," Kai informed her. "Your effect has run out."

"Remind me to maim you later."

Quistis stood, bringing the class to order. "Good morning. The purpose of this session is to review the field exam mission and to provide you with an overview of what succeeded-and the reasons why most of you did not make a qualifying score. I want all of you to understand that none of you failed yesterday, that by the standards of most military organizations, you all are very effective soldiers. The standards by which a SeeD is judged are the highest in the world, and very few attain them at first. This is your first step in achieving what your fellow classmates already have." She turned her attention to Eric, Aiko, and Kai. "As for you, this is the last day that you will be considered students. If SeeD had a mission for you, you would not be here now. You set the example that they will follow."

(example? What kind of example were you, Quistis?)_

_ _That stopped her for a moment. That had almost sounded like someone speaking to her, not her own thoughts. A brief flash of pain stabbed through her temple, as if someone had pricked her with a needle made of ice. She shook it off and continued. "The field exam involved units of the cadet corps supporting the main SeeD force during our contracted mission from Esthar." Esthar had an open contract with SeeD to deal with the hordes of monsters drawn by Lunatic Pandora to Tear's Point during the Lunar Cry. Quistis privately believed that Esthar was perfectly capable of dealing with the monsters, only using SeeD to study their techniques in the event another sorceress arose. _Or Rinoa, let's be honest_, she thought. Rinoa was still a sorceress, still possessed the frightening potential for power that Adel and Ultimecia had displayed. Worse, Rinoa had the strongest warrior on the planet as her guardian, which made targeting her a problem. Quistis hated thinking along those lines, and had no choice. Someone in Esthar had already, in all likelihood. "Cadet squads A,B, and C were assigned the duty of protecting the left rear quadrant of the sweep areaâ€¦" She read her report, only mildly bothered by the mild residual ache from whatever had gone through her head. It was probably just tension, she decided, and continued reading. The fun part would come when she told a group of sixteen and seventeen year olds, who had seen the plains of Esthar swarm with unearthly monsters, why they had failed.

Casey Wellon was a sixteen year old girl, a member of Selphie's flight class who had, through a call from her instructor, had found out that she had the larger part of the day free. While most of her teachers would find something to replace the flight training ended by the combination of the _Ragnarok_ being serviced after bringing the cadet class back from Esthar and the weather. They weren't Selphie Tilmitt. She had told her pupils to do, "oh, whatever" and had left it at that. Casey had decided to work on her beauty sleep, and had done so until 8:30, when she finally got up. She supposed that her roommate was not there; the poor girl had gone down to Esthar for the test and had failed. _Stuck in class while I get to play_, she thought as she went to the window. It was still raining hard, enough to cancel the afternoon flights as well. _Things are looking up_, she told herself. She turned and saw that the door to her dorm room was open a crack, and she swore to herself. _Here I am in a nightshirt and Sally leaves the door open_. Enough perverts drooled at her over her uniform, but this was worse. She stalked out into the common area that the double dormitory room shared, hoping no drooling underclassman saw more of her legs than the law allowed-

-and the last thing she saw was a shadowy form, possibly a girl if the build and long hair were any indication, rushing at her out of the corner of her eyes. Then something cold struck her head and Casey spiraled into the dark. The shadow girl stood over her victim and smiled, a flash of light in the darkness. "She's perfect," she said. "Just my size, in fact." She bent over and touched Casey's face. "You made me do this, Quistis. More's the pity."

Quistis found herself thinking about her field exam as Kai Hallen had, rather impressively, given a report on the disposition of the cadet squads in relation to the on-site tactical situation.

She was not thinking about the actual mission, which was unusual, given what the subject of the meeting was. Rather, she was thinking about a conversation that she had had on the amphibious transport on

the way to the combat zone. She had been discussing the mission profile with Xu, who was also taking the field exam, when Aileen Navarre had interrupted. "C'mon, Quistis, the Headmaster already told us this back at Garden. Why rehash it now?" She had flipped a hand through her black hair before saying "It's not like you're going to fail. You need to loosen up."

"If I loosen up today, I'll fail," she had told Aileen, and she lived by that credo in combat to this day. Aileen had smiled and said "Just don't try that with a guy, Quisty. Men don't like them tense."

(they don't do they quistis?)_

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_ _This time, it sounded as if the speaker was right behind her, and she turned, startled. Kai stopped giving his report and said, "Uh, Instructor, I haven't perfected my ventriloquism act yet. I'm still over here."

She saw that Eric was staring rather intently at her, and Aiko was actually paying attention for a change. "Sorry, I thought I heard something. You were saying, Kai?"

Kai continued giving his report, of which Quistis heard perhaps every third word. She was now utterly certain that something was wrong. She had experienced her share of abnormalities before; Ellone's hijacking of her spirit to re-live the past of Laguna had been particularly strange. This was different, though. As odd as it had been to journey to the past, she had never felt the way she did right now while she had been looking through the eyes of Laguna's friends. For the first time in a long time, Quistis Trepe was scared, and she had no idea why. Kai finished his report, and she picked up where he left off almost on auto-pilot, a sign of her training if nothing else. _What's the matter with me? What is there to be scared of?_

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Perhaps mercifully, the class ended, and she sent the candidates who had failed the exam off with just the sort of words that would encourage them without seeming too condescending. She told the three SeedS in the room not to get too comfortable with doing nothing, as at any moment they could be sent to the Seed garrison in Esthar or to any other mission that came up. She dismissed the class and stood, hoping to find a means to understand what was happening, and was not surprised when Eric walked over to her. Behind him, Aiko and Kai exchanged knowing glances and apparently decided that it was time to try out for the Garden track team by sprinting out of the classroom. A ghost of a smile crossed Eric's face. "Those two'll be the death of me," he said.

Quistis sat back down. "What do you want, Eric?"

"I'm almost afraid to ask this, since it will probably wind up all over the net in fifteen minutes. It's just that, well—are you all right? You seem a bit distracted."

"I'm fine. Just had a bad night's sleep. Thanks for asking. How are you doing?"

"Do you mean in general or about our specific situation? If it's the latter, I'm not really concerned. People will think whatever they want about you. When you let it get to you they've won."

"An admirable philosophy, Eric. Wish it always worked that way." She stood again. "I suppose I'll see you around. You aren't my student anymore."

"Look on the bright side. Neither is Aiko."

Quistis almost managed a laugh for that line. "Tell you the truth, I'm almost going to miss her. She kept me on my toes." She walked out of the room, seeing out of the corner of her eye Aiko leaning against the door. Aiko ducked back into the room, leaving Quistis to wonder what was going to happen next.

Eric was looking at the screen behind the desk, his mind clearly somewhere else. Aiko stepped up behind him and asked "What is it?"

Eric did not turn. "Something's coming, Aiko. Something cold."

Aiko frowned. "What is it? The usual sort of trouble for this place?"

Eric shook his head. "It's worse, far worse. I can feel it."

Aiko sighed. "You really know how to ruin a perfectly good mood, Eric."

Quistis rode the elevator down to the first floor, her head pounding. The same ice-sharp pain that had struck her earlier had returned as she had waited for the elevator to arrive, hard enough to cause her to actually wince. Whatever she had intended to do was going to have to wait; she was going to have to go to the infirmary and try to get to the bottom of this pain. The sensation reminded her, in a painful way, of the feeling that one had as his or her mind junctioned with a GF. Is this another side effect of long term GF usage? I've been junctioning for longer than anyone here at Balamb. She hoped that was not the case-despite the dangers of using the GF, they allowed SeeD the advantage of their power. She stepped off of the elevator, and the pain thundered to a crescendo that caused her to sway on her feet. She put a hand against the wall beside of the elevator to steady herself. She was utterly certain that she was dying

(well not yet Quistis)

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Her eyes moved as if compelled by an outside force to rest on a girl, leaning against the directory display with her back to Quistis. She wore a cadet's uniform, and had long black hair that went to her waist. She raised a hand and flipped it through her hair in a gesture so familiar that Quistis barely believed she had seen it.

(but I'm working on it.)

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_ _The girl turned, her face briefly showing in half profile, and Quistis thought that her heart would stop. _That-that isn't possible!!!_ _It can't be her!!!_ Quistis screamed to herself. The girl flashed her a truly malicious smile, then started walking for the entrance. She found herself following on unsteady feet at first, the girl walking at a brisk pace. Quistis increased her pace as the girl passed through the entrance and headed for the reception area. She figured that the gates there would slow her down, yet as she came into the area, the girl was nowhere to be seen. She scanned her surroundings and saw the girl, maintaining the same distance that had separated them at first sight, beneath the archway at the far side of the reception plaza. Quistis hurdled the gates and broke into a full run, ignoring the rain that hit her as soon as she reached the open air. The girl went down the steps beyond the arch, still the same distance away from her. Sure enough, when she stood beneath the archway, the girl was already at the wrought-iron gates that marked the end of the Garden property.

(good girl Quistis you always were the brave one, weren't you?)

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"Who are you?" she shouted, her voice lost in the storm.

The girl walked past the gate, which opened without her doing anything apparent to move it. This time, Quistis heard the same voice that had been speaking to her with her own ears. "You know who I am, my dear. You know."

(_first squad pinned down by sniper fire and concentrated magic use! Request immediate support! Request immediate support!)_

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_ _Quistis fell to her knees, caught wholly off guard by that. This time, it had not been the girl who now was walking across the plains speaking. No, this time, it was her voice, younger and scared. "What's going on here?" she wondered.

(_follow me and find out, Quistis. the fire cavern. I'm sure you remember the way)_

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Quistis considered turning back and getting someone, anyone, to go with her. She was bewildered by voices in her head, and gripped by the utter certainty that something was terribly wrong here. And yet, she went out into the gloom alone, her hand on the comforting weight of Save the Queen on her hip. She knew, somehow, that involving anyone else was likely to be fatal to them, and she could not live with that on her conscience.

She did not notice, so intent on the girl, someone come down the steps behind her and stop at the gate. That person peered into the rain, then, after a moment, followed.

The fire cavern was five miles from Balamb Garden, surrounded by a thick band of forest that was home to a variety of wild monsters that were usually among a cadet's first kills. Quistis walked through the forest in a daze, only remembering that she had killed a

caterchipiller with a single crack of her whip when she saw its greenish blood on her leg, dripping from the tip of Save the Queen. That was not a comfort to her. She sometimes saw the girl, moving from tree to tree as if she was some sort of mythic spirit. Soaked to the bone, Quistis left the forest and, away from the undergrowth that had slowed her, ran again. She thanked whomever would listen to her that no one was going to be visiting the fire cavern for a few weeks, as all the candidates who were qualified to visit the cave already had. Otherwise, there would have been Garden masters there, and that probably would have been bad for them.

No one waited by the mouth of the cave, which was not exactly unexpected. Quistis stopped just outside the cave, feeling the heat from the lava that pooled inside. Her tactical options weren't all that good, with the cavern having only one clear path for half it's length and rather bad visibility due to the heat haze. She thought about the time that she had come here with Squall, the same day that Seifer had scarred him during training, the same day that she had, in a clumsy fashion, tried to connect with Squall on a personal level.

(the day you chose to remember.)

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Quistis took Save the Queen in one hand and took a deep breath. _You stared death in the face when we fought Ultimecia, when we defeated Adel, when we faced Ultima Weapon. Why are you so scared?_ For that, the teacher had no answer, and she went into the cave.

The heat struck her like a living thing, the lava, so incongruous after the greenery of the forest, bubbling and spitting. The air was charged with the presence of the fire elemental Ifrit, and with something else. She guessed it was her fear. She walked down the center of the winding path through the cave, every sense attuned to her surroundings. There was no attack, not even from the Bombs and red bats that called this place home. That was somehow more disquieting than being attacked, she decided.

Presently, she reached the part of the path that widened to both sides, an intersection of sorts. The girl stood there, still looking away. Quistis stopped, at the extreme edge of her whip's range, and cried "Who are you?!"

The girl turned, and Quistis' worst fears were confirmed. The same face, marked by a star shaped beauty mark on her left cheek, the same grey eyes, the same crooked grin, all of it the same. The girl locked eyes with her and said, in a whisper that was somehow heard over the tumult of the fire cavern, "You know. You've been thinking about me for the past two days."

"Aileen." She took a step back, unwittingly. "That's impossible. You-you'reâ€¦"

"Standing right in front of you. And look at you, terrified at my very sight. You'd think that after what happened, you'd be pleased to see me." Aileen crossed her arms over her chest. "We wouldn't have some issues here, would we Quistis?"

"I-what am I supposed to think? You-I saw youâ€¦"

"So you did. And yet here I am, against the odds." Aileen looked over her shoulder. "Do you remember the day that I came here with my instructor to battle Ifrit? You had already been here to do that, of course. You were waiting outside for me."

"I remember. You used most of your time limit to defeat Ifrit." Quistis' heart was about to pound out of her chest, and every instinct told her to flee, to leave this impossibility behind.

"Yes. You were waiting outside, already acting like a teacher instead of a pupil. As if I needed your damned help, Quistis." Aileen raised her right hand and closed it into a fist. "I defeated Ifrit with ten seconds left on my limit, and do you know what I heard from my Instructor? I heard that you did it with one second left. The highest possible score on the Judgment part of the exam. Perfect little Quistis Trepe, never makes a mistake." She opened her hand and a perfect blue globe of energy appeared there. "Except for one time!" The globe flashed towards Quistis, who had a split second to throw herself aside as it passed. It hit the cavern wall and exploded impressively. Quistis rose to her feet as Aileen hurled two more globes at her. She leaped over them and rolled towards Aileen, Save the Queen slicing out in a lethal arc. Aileen avoided it by the barest movement of her head, catching the chain in her left hand. She pulled, her strength impossible, and Quistis soared towards her. Which actually worked in her favor. She caught Aileen with a perfect kick across the jaw, then, as she fell to the ground, she cast a Blizzaga spell. The ice-based spell struck Aileen square on, enveloping her in a momentary frigid prison. Aileen shattered the ice with a wave of her arms, then she rushed towards Quistis, faster than she could imagine. Aileen kned Quistis in the stomach and blasted her away with a back fist. "Are you enjoying yourself, Quistis?" she mocked.

Quistis tasted blood on her lips and hoped that it came from the blow to her face. She had never been hit that hard in her life, and it was possible that the knee to her stomach could have caused internal injuries. "Why are you doing this, Aileen? I don't want to fight you."

"You had better. Because I'm going to kill you. It's just more dignified for you to die on your feet." She generated energy in her hands again, and this time sent it at Quistis in the form of a beam that, defying the laws of physics, she could actually see coming. Quistis jumped into the air, riding the explosion into a perfectly timed leap past Aileen. On reflex, she cracked her whip, and it slapped across Aileen's ribs. Her opponent fell back, giving Quistis the second that she needed to end this battle. She reached deep within her and cast the best spell for the situation, Holy. A white light surrounded Aileen, a pure aura that expanded with a concussive impact that drove Quistis to one knee, one arm covering her eyes. _I'm so sorry, Aileen. Forgive me._

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The glow faded, and Aileen stood, unscathed, at the heart of the holocaust that she had unleashed. She wagged a finger at Quistis, a wry and familiar smile on her face. "I'm not what you think I am, my friend." She raised her power, a corona of blue energy surrounding her. "As you'll find out." With a wordless scream, she unleashed her

power in all directions, waves of force rippling the lava and shaking the cave. Quistis fell, barely conscious, her ears ringing from the force Aileen had wielded. _Where is she getting that power from? Even a sorceress would have trouble matching that._ She felt Aileen grab her by the collar of her uniform and lift her, one handed. She playfully, maliciously, slapped Quistis across the face. "All these years, I somehow thought it would be harder than this. Mind you, I'm not complaining." She gripped Quistis by the neck and squeezed, her grip iron. Quistis wanted to struggle, but she could not find the strength to do it. "I did expect more of you, though. Goodbye."

Something blurred past Aileen, a flash of silver catching her between the shoulder blades. She released Quistis and clutched at her back, turning to reveal a deep slash that did not bleed. "Who the hell are you?" she spat.

Quistis shook her head to clear it and saw Eric, standing in a combat stance, his sword in his hands. "Let's just call me an interested observer," he replied. "Sorry I was so late, Quistis."

Aileen chuckled. "Funny you should mention the word 'late'. It will describe you soon."

Eric did not speak, he just charged, his sword at his side. Aileen hurled a globe of power at Eric, who, much to Quistis' shock, batted it aside with the flat of the blade. He unleashed an overhand strike that Aileen avoided, his weapon cratering the ground from the impact. Quistis spotted an opening and called one of her Blue Magic skills, Laser Eye. The beam hit Aileen in the small of the back, dropping her like an unstrung puppet. Eric closed on her, and for a moment Quistis thought it was over. Until Aileen disappeared, reappearing the instant Eric passed where she had been. She laid a palm against his spine and her power caught him, tossing him out over the lava. Eric should have died there, burned to death in an instant, yet somehow he found an outcropping of rock to save him. He pushed off with his feet on the spire and flew back at Aileen, his sword slicing into her shoulder. She howled, more in frustration than pain, and she retaliated, grabbing Eric by one wrist and throwing him into the rock of the path. "You are a stubborn sort, aren't you?" she asked him. "Are you driven by her charms or by your duty, little Seed?"

"I'll ask him later," Quistis said into Aileen's ear. She deftly wrapped the length of Save the Queen around Aileen's neck and with all her strength threw her over the shoulder into the lava. Aileen thrashed her arms and legs wildly, the flesh melting from her bones, as she sank beneath the surface. Quistis watched, tears forming in her eyes. _I don't understand how it happened, but it's over, _she thought.

Eric got to his feet, sheathing his sword over his shoulder. It dawned on Quistis that she did not know the name by which Eric called his blade, if he even did. "I'm glad I didn't believe you when you said nothing was wrong. Who was that?"

Before Quistis could answer, the ground began to shake beneath their feet. The lava pool quivered violently, and a bubble formed on the surface. Acting on instinct, Quistis cast a Protect spell on herself and threw herself in front of Eric as the bubble exploded, flinging lava everywhere as Aileen, impossibly unscathed, the cadet uniform

she had worn burnt away, soared out. Most of the lava hit the barrier she had cast, some streams burning her and Eric. Aileen hovered over them and shook her head. "I did not expect to be double-teamed, Quisty. That was the point of linking with your mind, to bring just you to me. If your boyfriend wants to play, though, he's welcome to join in." She began to fade from view, her voice still maintaining its volume. "If you wish to keep playing, then you must follow me home. I'll be waiting." With that, she was gone, although Quistis knew it was not over. It might never end.

Eric cast a Cure spell on himself and did the same for her. It eased the physical pain at least. "You know, everyone thinks I'm your boyfriend," he said in a rare burst of humor. "Who, or should I say, what was that?"

"Aileen Navarre. She was the cadet that I told you about last night."

Eric digested this bit of information. "The one you said was killed on a mission. Could you have been mistaken? She was just missing in action, perhaps?"

Quistis waved at the lava. "Disregarding the fact that she just melted in there and came out without a burn mark on her, there's the matter of her power. She did not have that kind of power when I knew her. And there's one more thing to consider."

"And that is?"

Quistis walked towards the exit of the fire cavern. "I was there when she died, Eric. She

was shot twice in the head. There's no possible way that she could be here alive." _And I can't figure out why she wants to kill me. In fact, I don't know _how _I know how Aileen died, or even where it happened. And that scares me more than Aileen being alive at all._

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To be continued

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3. Undertow

> <meta name="Generator"> Part Two: Undertow

Kindred Spirits Part Two: Undertow

Squall Leonhart had developed a habit, ever since Seifer had scarred his face during a training battle, of rubbing the scar across the bridge of his nose at times of stress. He was not sure if he gained any solace from it or if it served as a concentration aid, and doubted that it mattered much. Becoming the Combat Master of Balamb Garden, the official title given him at the end of his war, had not lessened his stress level, and Rinoa liked to joke that he was going to need a plastic surgeon if he did not stop dealing with stress in that way. Given the current situation, he was beginning to agree with her; just trying to understand what had happened in the past few

hours would likely cause him a few headaches. First had come the report from Doctor Kadowaki that one of the cadets, a girl named Casey Wellon, had been found unconscious in her dormitory room, apparently the victim of an attack judging by the ransacking that her room had gone through. Squall was in the process of beginning the investigation into that, a matter of checking the Garden's security cameras, when Quistis arrived, looking like she had taken on a small army, talking about a mysterious intruder that had defeated not only her but a Level 10 SeeD with ease. Squall was not all that surprised to find out that Eric Alfredsson had been beaten—he was formidable yet still relatively green—but Quistis was another matter. She was not Head Instructor because she was a pretty face, after all. Squall judged that he would find it hard to defeat her in battle, and yet someone had. I don't like this, he thought, watching as Doctor Kadowaki tended to Casey Wellon. The girl lay on a bed in the infirmary, which had been expanded and refitted when the Garden had returned home, pale, the only sign of life the telltales on the monitoring board. "How is she?" Squall asked the doctor.

"I'm not certain," Kadowaki replied. " Everything that I can find suggests to me that she suffered some sort of head trauma, yet I can't find any sign of a physical injury. Her brain wave activity is odd, as well. Which is a good sign, since when she was first brought in, she was flatlined—no activity at all."

"What could cause that?" Squall asked.

"Any number of things in all likelihood." She walked over to the monitors and watched the display showing Casey's brain wave pattern. The line moved across the screen in a series of identical low curves. Kadowaki frowned. "There's something familiar about this," she said, her voice thoughtful. Squall was about to inquire further when Kadowaki waved at him with one hand in a dismissive gesture. "I'll handle this, Squall. It's my duty, after all. Your concern is what happened to Quistis and that other young man."

Squall might have been Combat Master, but he knew better than to argue with the doctor. She had been stitching up training scars and dealing with the sort of injuries that came with youth for quite some time, long enough that she was not impressed by his title. He made his goodbyes and went out to the waiting room, where Quistis and Eric were. Quistis was leaning against the doctor's desk, holding her left arm with her right; Squall was not certain if she was favoring an injury or not. Her face was bruised and swollen, and there was a distant look to her eyes that Squall had never seen before. Eric was standing by the door, practically at attention; a bandage around his left biceps covered the worst of the burns that Quistis' Protect spell had not prevented. As was his way, he saluted Squall, who did not return it. He had bigger worries than protocol. "Quistis, what happened out there?" he asked.

"I wish I knew," she whispered. She doubted that Squall would find that an acceptable answer, so she pressed on. "It—it was someone who claimed to be Aileen Navarre, a former SeeD. And I believe it was, even if Aileen is dead."

"Hold on a minute. You're saying that you fought someone who is dead and yet you think it's the same person? Quistis, that doesn't make any sense."

"I didn't say it did, Squall!" she snapped, loud enough to cause Squall to step back. "I know that it doesn't. I hit her with a Holy spell and she shrugged it off like it was nothing. She used some sort of non-elemental energy attacks I've seen no SeeD ever use. I threw her into a pit of lava and watched her body melt, and in no time at all she reappeared, unscathed. All of that tells me that it wasn't Aileen-and yet it was."

Squall decided to start over. He turned to Eric and asked "How did you come to be there, Mr. Alfredsson?"

Eric paused for an instant, looking towards Quistis as if waiting for her approval. She's not your teacher anymore, Eric, Squall thought. You don't need to wait for her anymore. Quistis did not meet his eyes, lost in thought. Eric took a deep breath and began. "I was concerned about her, sir. Something appeared to be bothering her earlier in class, during the after action report. I followed her to the first floor and saw her preparing to leave the campus. I followed her to the Fire Cavern and saw that she was engaged in combat with what seemed to be a woman." Eric described her with such detail that Squall could not help but wonder if Eric had a photographic memory. "I say 'seemed' because when I wounded her with Griev-with my sword, she did not bleed." Across the room, Quistis perked up a little, struck by how Eric had nearly said the name of his sword. One of the little mysteries about Eric, second only to why he tolerated Aiko, was the name of his weapon, if it even had one. "Her strength and speed were beyond SeeD capabilities, and she did seem to re-generate a new body," he continued. I don't know if she was who Quistis claims she is, and that is irrelevant. She's a threat, sir."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Alfredsson. Why did you follow her with out looking for back up?"

"I didn't have time to get on the PA, sir. I am a SeeD, aren't I?"

That was the closest to insubordinate that Eric was likely to get, Squall thought. Reminds me a little of me before I got my head on straight. He turned his attention to Quistis, hoping that she had had time to gather her thoughts. "Who is this Aileen person, Quistis?"

"She was my best friend when I was a cadet. She and I graduated together. She was killed on my second mission." Quistis was speaking in a flat monotone, almost as if reciting something from a book. "I'm sure her records are still on file here. You could ask Cid and Xu about her if they were here." The Headmaster and her old friend were currently in Esthar, running the on-going contract to deal with the monsters along with Zell Dincht. "I just wish I knew why she was doing this."

Squall was about to inquire into the specific circumstances of Aileen's death when Selphie burst into the room, her face a mask of worry. She brushed Eric's bandaged arm, causing him to wince. "Squall, where's Casey?!" she cried. Squall was a little confused until she remembered that Casey was one of Selphie's trainees. "Is she all right?"

"She's with Dr. Kadowaki now. She's in some sort of coma." Selphie did not wait for the word, just blasted past Squall and headed into

the infirmary proper. Eric waited until she was out of the room before he said "Oh, damn, that hurt."

Quistis actually managed to smile over that. "I'm sure she didn't mean to do that. We have to figure out what to do now. Aileen—we have to call her something, Squall, even if she isn't her—said that if we wanted to find her, we would have to follow her home. That would be the Dollet Dukedom. I hope that means that she won't come back here if I go."

"What do you mean, go?" Squall asked in a dangerous tone of voice, the one Quistis called his "Don't mess with me" voice. "I'm not going to just let you chase off after a threat likethat withoutâ€|"

"Without what? Squall, she wants to kill me. I can't—I won't—sit still and wait for her to come back here and hurt someone else."

Squall rubbed at the scar. "I understand that, Quistis. Your life is at risk here. I have to consider that. But I won't let you throw your life away, either."

Quistis pondered this for a moment, organizing her thoughts. She had to convince Squall to let her deal with this on her own, to spare her friends from the baleful malice that Aileen had evidenced. "I'm not going to throw my life away, Squall. She has planned this very well—she said that she used some sort of mind link to draw me to her, and when she encountered unexpected resistance, she clearly had a back-up plan. Do you really think that I would just wildly chase after her, alone?" She indicated the door that Selphie had gone through. "There's a girl in there who might die because of Aileen, Squall. I have to stop her. But I won't go alone. How I go is up to you—I'm only Head Instructor, you're Combat Master. You can assign SeedS without a contracted mission." She hoped that it was enough; Squall may have mellowed since meeting Rinoa, but all that meant was that he was somewhat stubborn and hard headed, not constantly so.

Squall surprised her. "I never said that I wouldn't let you go, Quistis. I just wanted to make certain that you weren't going to do anything foolish. Mr. Alfredsson?" Eric stopped focusing on the pain that Selphie's inadvertent contact had brought and snapped to attention. Quistis was beginning to wonder if Eric ever relaxed. "I'm not quite certain yet what sort of response team I'm willing to designate, given our current manpower commitment to Esthar. Since you battled the, ah, target, I'm ordering you to accompany Quistis."

"Yes, sir." Eric's expression was unreadable; with what had happened over the past day, though, Quistis imagined that Eric was probably thinking about the world-class ribbing that Aiko was going to give him over his first mission. "Do you have any orders for me, sir?"

Squall decided that Eric was the most serious minded person he had ever met. "Not at present, soldier. You won't be leaving until tomorrow, anyway—since Dollet isn't that far away, relatively speaking, you'll be transported by one of the assault boats. The weather forecast for tomorrow is clear."

Selphie returned, cutting off any response from Eric or Quistis. Her normal exuberance was masked by a seriousness that made her seem her age instead of the perpetual teenager that she projected. "Poor Casey," she sighed, "what happened to her?"

"She was attacked by the same entity that attacked us," Quistis told her. "Something-someone-that wanted to kill me."

Selphie's eyes widened in shock. "Kill you? Why? Who was it?"

Eric saved Quistis from having to deal with telling the story again. "Quistis said it was a former SeeD named Aileen Navarre. That she had somehow come back from the dead, with power that no SeeD has ever had."

Selphie frowned. "That didn't help. Did she hurt you, Quistis?"

"Nothing too bad," Quistis replied. Physically at least, she thought. "Thanks to Eric," she added.

Selphie's expression brightened marginally. "Oh, yeah. You're Eric-that Eric." She noticed the bandage on his arm and said "I ran into that arm, didn't I? Sorry."

"Think nothing of it," he said, as if he had not felt a thing.

Selphie turned her back so her face was hidden from Eric and mouthed "Oh, gosh, he's fine, you lucky girl," to Quistis. So much for Selphie putting out the fire of those rumors, Quistis thought. Aloud, she said, "So, what are we gonna do, Squall? We can't let someone get away with this."

"We aren't, Selphie. Quistis and Eric are going after the entity tomorrow, once I determine how many people to send with them."

Quistis saw a chance and took it. "Squall, if we're going to Dollet by boat, you can't send much more than a squad, can you? Unless you authorize using the Ragnarok, we can't take that many."

Squall swore to himself. He had hoped that by giving Quistis a cooling off period, he could convince her to allow him to reassemble the main combat team that had fought Adel and Ultimecia before tomorrow. He had hung himself by his words, and Quistis was in control of the situation. She doesn't want anyone else to get hurt, he thought. Going by boat lessens the number of men that can go. Squall sighed. "You know that I can't send the Ragnarok, Quistis. All right, you win. It'll be squad strength. Should I ask for volunteers or will you handle it?"

"Actually, that will be Eric's call. Unless you reactivate me as a combat SeeD, he'll be in command." Quistis had a fairly good idea of who Eric would select for the mission anyway, since he could only pick two. "Come on, Eric, let's get started." She headed for the door, Eric taking the time to collect his burn-marked uniform jacket and his sword before leaving.

Behind them, Selphie nudged Squall with an elbow and remarked, "You know, I think they make a cute couple." Squall barely acknowledged her, lost in thought. In the midst of all of Quistis' machinations, her desperate need to confront the enemy alone, she had not managed to keep him from thinking about one thing; what had happened, when Aileen had died, to make Quistis accept at face value that she would return, wishing her dead.

Dr. Kadowaki emerged from the infirmary and seemed a bit surprised to see that Quistis and Eric were gone. "I wasn't quite finished with them, you know. That lad's burns were a bit severe. Where are they?"

"They're going after the entity that attacked them. Something that called itself Aileen Navarre." Squall went to the door. "Keep me updated on the Wellon girl, Doctor."

"I will, Squall," she told him. She waited for Selphie to leave, which took a few more minutes of Selphie asking for the same updates that Squall was to get, before she sat down behind her desk and let the shock that she had felt upon hearing Aileen's name show. "Oh, Quistis," she lamented, "you poor thing. You poor little thing."

Eric waited for Quistis to reach the center hub of the Garden before he asked her "Why are you so determined to fight this battle alone?"

Quistis looked back over her shoulder at Eric and was lost for words. She doubted that she had fooled Squall—he knew her way too well—and she had hoped that Eric was in the dark. She had been forced to accept Eric's presence by circumstances, and had acted to limit the number of people that would be involved when the opportunity arose. That Eric had caught on suggested to her that her motives went beyond transparent. "Whether I am or not is beside the point, Eric. Squall ordered you to go. Your duty is to fulfill your orders to the best of your ability."

"That it is, Quistis." He decided to press the point later; she would tell him if he really needed to know why. Or so he hoped. "So, who do you want to take with us?" he asked, returning to the greater issue at hand.

"It's your call, Eric. And since I know you'll say Aiko and Kai, we might as well find them and get started."

Eric nearly smiled over that. Seems I'm not the only one who's not hiding things well, he thought. "They are good choices; Kai for support and the rest of us for actual combat. Before we go, Quistis, let me just say that as far as I'm concerned, you're in command. So don't worry about the technicalities of the situation. I'd be a fool to tell you what to do."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Eric. You did pretty good out there today."

"Not good enough," he said under his breath. He gave himself a once-over and realized that he and Quistis were both quite the mess. Going to and from the fire cavern in the rain and fighting in a life or death struggle will do that to you, he supposed. "If I can make a

suggestion on a matter other than personnel, I think we could both use a bit of clean-up."

If she looked as bedraggled as Eric did, then he was right. Since she had taken the worst of the fight, then she probably looked worse. "You have a point. Can you run down Aiko and Kai for me? We'll meet at the library and go over what we can before we prepare to leave."

"Shouldn't be too hard to find Kai. He's always in the library, 'honing his skills as the Ace' as he likes to say. Aiko, well, I'll find her. Shall we call it two hours just to be safe?"

"Sounds good," she said, walking away from him. She realized that she had neglected to do something and turned, calling his name. The cadets that were in the general vicinity suddenly found just about anything to look at other than Quistis and Eric. "Thank you for saving me from her," she said, not caring what kind of rumors that it generated.

Eric's reply was rather self-effacing. "Actually, I should say the same thing to you. Let's just call it even." He saluted and went his way.

Quistis walked through the Garden, noticing the odd looks that the cadets and the occasional faculty member gave her. She was aware that her head was throbbing, probably the result of Aileen's savage strength. She relived the battle in her mind, going over everything that had happened from the moment that she had entered the fire cavern with the trained analytical mind that served her so well as a SeeD, and she could find no logical reason to accept why she should believe the thing that called itself Aileen was her friend. And yet she did, instinctively, in the depths of her soul. She reached her quarters and went in, for a moment unable to reconcile the room that she had left this morning with this one. She tossed Save the Queen onto her bed with an idle gesture. She removed her uniform with roughly the same care that she had laid down her weapon and went into the bathroom.

She studied her reflection in the mirror and, off hand, she had seen worse. Not on her, admittedly, but she had seen worse. She touched the bruises on her face with a certain sense of wonder, and for some reason, that brought it home for her. Her friend, the girl that had gotten her through more than one close scrape at school, a person who, looking back at it, had helped her get through some of the traumas of her failed adoption, had hurt her. Had tried to kill her. Wanted her to die. Everything that she had hid from Squall and Eric, the emotion that had prompted her to try to keep as many people as possible out of this, burst out, and, with a shout of incoherent rage, she punched the mirror hard enough to break it. She buried her head in her forearms against the edge of the sink and, for the first time in years, Quistis Treppe began to cry.

Eric found Aiko in her new quarters, identifiable by the sign that read "TRESSPASSERS WILL BE SHOT-SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGAIN" that she had hung on her half of the double dormitory room that she had been assigned to. She had transferred the current version-the hall proctors had tended to tear her little statement down on a regular basis-with glee to her current door. It was on that sheet of printer paper that he knocked, and knocked again until Aiko sleepily grumbled

"I'm coming, damnit." She opened the door, wearing one of her typical outfits, a black skintight catsuit under her SeeD uniform jacket. There were times that Eric understood why people thought what they did about him and Aiko; she was seriously attractive, and the people who thought of them as lovers were probably giving him credit. She yawned-Aiko had stayed out far too late for the party-and asked "What happened to you?"

Eric walked into her room before someone saw her and started yet another series of stories. "Remember what I told you I sensed? Something cold? I ran into it." He sat down at the table in the front room before continuing. "You were asleep?" he asked.

"Halfway there. You did tell me to wait here until you got back. I was about to doze off." She indicated the burns on his uniform jacket. "Looking at you, I'd say that I should have gone with you. What happened?"

"You'll find out. The short form is Quistis got attacked and I helped. Now she's going after the enemy, I've been ordered to go with her, and guess who else is going?"

"Me, right." Aiko took the chair opposite of him. "I've got a long series of dental appointments, you know. Might not be able to make it." The joke fell flat. "Don't worry, Eric; the last time I checked, we're a team." She appeared to study her toes under the table, which did not fool Eric. "Eric," she began, "has it-has it started?"

Eric closed his eyes. "I hope not. I hope not."

Aiko reached over and took his hand. "You still don't lie to me very well, little brother." Aiko had not called him that for years, long years before their families had sent them to Galbadia Garden. It had started because of their age difference-she was two months older than him-and the fact that they had once been mistaken for siblings. She had stopped calling him that at the age of fourteen when a prospective boyfriend had believed that Eric really was her brother and he was afraid of him. "You know what's coming, Eric. You have since your father died."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Eric rose to his feet. "Quistis wants to meet in the library in about two hours. I need to get cleaned up and find Kai; he's going too."

"Kai! Goody!" Kai was one of her favorite people at Balamb Garden because, when she had pulled her notorious cadet-hazing stunt about her figure, his response had been "Gravity always wins." She had been so thrown off guard by it that Kai had escaped from her, and she wound up liking him for his sheer pluck. "He's always fun to have around."

"Just hope that he can take it. This one could get rough. We aren't killing weak monsters that were fleeing the main combat zone this time."

"Noticed that, didn't you?" Aiko let Eric leave before she said a rather rude word. She could care less that Eric had volunteered her for a mission; they worked well together and that chemistry would help overcome their inexperience. She just did not like the way

events were progressing, and the effect that they had on Eric. Plus I didn't like the way he said "Quistis", she thought. I'd get jealous if I didn't have a better body than her. "You should have let me go with you in the first place," she said to herself.

Squall had never been much on computers-he considered logging into the system to be a major pain-so when Rinoa found him at his desk in the Combat Master's office, hunched over the workstation, she could not help but find it odd. She walked over so she stood behind him, looked over his shoulder, and asked "What're you doing, Squall?" in her usual playful manner. Squall did not answer; he was studying a menu on the monitor as if his life depended on it. Rinoa read what was displayed, then remarked "Student record archives? What are you up to, hon?"

Squall finally answered. "Someone attacked Quistis today. They claimed to be a former SeeD named Aileen Navarre, who is supposed to be dead. I'm trying to find her files."

"I heard that Quistis had had some trouble. That's why I'm here. " Rinoa reached past him and touched one of the touch-sensitive icons on screen, the one marked "Index". "Do you have her student registration number?" Rinoa asked. "No, probably not." She called up a search engine and told it to display all inactive files for students using the letter "N" as the key. Squall gave Rinoa one of those little looks that he reserved for her when she did something unexpected. "What?" she asked as the engine went to work.

"When did you learn to do that? Use the Garden system, I mean?"

Rinoa grinned at him. "You learn a lot watching Selphie update her network page every couple of weeks. You went to school here and you don't know the ins and outs of it?"

Squall was saved by the screen lighting up with the listing that Rinoa had requested. He scanned the list and quickly found the name Navarre, Aileen, and part of him was relieved. At least Quistis told the truth about that. He selected her name and found himself looking at what had to be Aileen's records. There was a picture there, showing a pretty girl with long black hair and a beauty mark on her cheek. Squall could not reconcile this person with someone capable of wanting Quistis dead. He paged through the file, not too terribly interested in her evaluations from her instructors or reports from the Disciplinary Committee on some indiscretion of hers. It took a bit, since the report covered all of her time at Balamb Garden, from her first day as a cadet to her time as a SeeD. Finally, Squall found what he was looking for. "SeeD Level Eight Aileen Navarre, killed in action during SeeD Contract 358451-AVN-D1945," he read aloud. Someone had appended her autopsy photos to the file, and Rinoa gasped and looked away. "Cause of death, head trauma caused by impact consistent with multiple gun shot wounds," Squall continued. "Two entry wounds at the front of the skull, exiting at the base of the spine. Bullet tracks consistent with hollow point loads. She's dead all right."

"Then who-or what-attacked Quistis?" Rinoa asked.

Squall went back through the report, looking for some kind of report on the mission where she had died and found none. Scowling, he

returned to the Index page and called up the Contract History. He entered the number by memory and was a bit surprised when he was denied access. "File access restricted to the Headmaster and the Garden Master," he said.

Rinoa had a contemplative expression on her face. "Squall, you pulled up that file pretty quick. Couldn't you have done that with Navarre's file?"

Squall sighed. He sometimes wished that Rinoa couldn't see through him so easily. "Guess I was worried about what I was going to find," he confessed. "And to tell you the truth, I'm still worried. What happened between Quistis and Aileen?"

"You could ask Quistis, you know? She is your friend." Rinoa draped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

Squall had a rather decent counter to that. "I'm her friend. She could tell me."

"You have a point," Rinoa admitted. "What now?"

"I haven't got a choice. Quistis is going out after whatever she fought. She wants to keep it away from here. She's leaving with a squad tomorrow."

"And we aren't going?" she asked. Squall did not answer. "Is that what she wants?" This time he nodded. Rinoa found that odd, to say the least, and she added herself to the list of people who were wondering what had happened all those years ago. Since meeting her in Timber during the War, Rinoa had always been impressed with the way Quistis carried herself, and on occasion had wished that she could perform in battle as well as Quistis did. It had never occurred to her that Quistis might be as vulnerable beneath the surface as she was, until now.

Quistis, dressed now in her favorite outfit, sat on her bed, the emotional storm having passed. She could not remember the last time that she had cried

(the day Aileen died/remember you promised to remember)

but she understood why it had happened. She had undergone a series of shocks that would have driven most people over the edge of sanity; a fifteen minute bout of crying seemed a small price to pay. After the spell had passed, she had cleaned up the mess that she had made before working on herself and, finally, cleaning the dried caterpillar blood from Save the Queen. She had decided to approach the problem of Aileen Navarre from a military perspective, having concluded that she had fought with her emotions, rather than as a Seed. The next time, she thought, I'll beat her. Somehow. She saw from her clock, the same one that had greeted her on this morning a seeming eternity ago, that it was nearly time to meet with Eric and his hand picked squad. She hoped that Eric was up to the task in front of them; if he was, he could drag Aiko and Kai with him. She picked up Save the Queen and left, wishing that the results of this departure differed from the last time. A small part of her soul told her that she was right; that this time, it was going to be worse. A lot worse. She stepped through the door and went to face her destiny.

During the Third Sorceress War, the Galbadian Army had invaded the Dollet Dukedom specifically for the purpose of reactivating the communications tower that loomed over the city like a metallic sentinel. One of the conditions of the withdrawal of Galbadia from Dollet had been that the tower be maintained, and that condition, at least, had been faithfully kept by the Dukedom. Even after Galbadia had fallen into civil war after the collapse of Ultimecia's puppet government, the tower had been maintained. Standing beneath the dish, her eyes shut, a predatory smile on her face, Aileen Navarre could feel the power that the tower hurled skyward in her very soul, so to speak. From her vantage point, if she opened her eyes, she could look to the east and to the sea that separated Dollet and Balamb, the distance between herself and her prey. Quistis had survived the first battle less because of the intervention of the swordsman but because Aileen had not been willing to extend her powers to the point of defeating the newcomer. Quistis had gotten stronger-Aileen had sensed the power that hid within Quistis-and the interloper hadn't lacked for power, either. "It's best to be cautious about these things," she said aloud.

"Is that so, Aileen?" a sibilant, reptilian voice spoke from everywhere and nowhere at once. A shadow enveloped her; the sound of leathery wings thrumming the air as the darkness claimed her vision and announced the presence of her dread lord. "Caution is a trait that I admire in my heralds, but I also admire the bold. You had sufficient power to defeat any of those SeedS, and yet you did not. You remain too human in your thinking."

"I-I am sorry, Lord Urizen. Will you punish me?"

The voice chuckled, the sort of sound that, if a human heard it, their eardrums would burst. Aileen shivered with a fear she had forgotten. "I do not grandstand, little Aileen. Had I wanted you punished, you would already would have been." Something that seemed to be a hand made of smoke, tipped with claws, stroked her cheek, glacier cold and feverish fire running through her. "I have set before you a task, Aileen. How you accomplish it is entirely up to you." Urizen's hand tightened into a fist in front of her eyes. "My patience is not unlimited, however. I have a timetable to keep, and it will not wait for you."

"Yes, Lord Urizen. Quistis and her sword bearing friend will follow me here, like lambs to the slaughter. And then they will die."

"I hope that you are correct," Urizen said. "I allowed you the chance to attain your vengeance because it suited me. Beware that it does not." The sound of wings came again, the darkness fading. "Do not fail me, Aileen." Urizen's voice hung in the air like blades on a thread over her head, threat and menace everywhere. Aileen leaned back against the tower, and took a deep breath that she did not need to take anymore. Old habits die hard, she thought. "Yes, Lord Urizen. I will not fail you. I will kill Quistis Trepe. She laughed, a sound while not as malevolent as Urizen's, certainly promised that she would do evil to whomever opposed her.

To be continuedâ€¦|

> <meta name="Generator"> Part Three: Murder

Kindred Spirits Part Three: Murder

Kai Hallen was proving to be insanelly useful, Quistis thought as she watched him pilot the assault boat that Squall had assigned them for the journey to Dollet.

Combat vehicle training was an integral part of any SeeD's regimen at Garden, the theory being that a SeeD should be able to operate any vehicle in any situation, the better to survive. In practice, however, many cadets who lacked in other areas would specialize in the logistical support areas while some cadets would have their curriculum altered to focus on combat skills. Kai was the poster child for the former type, intimately familiar with the functions of every ground car and boat used by SeeD, and Quistis did not doubt that, if he chose, he could pilot the Ragnarok. The amphibious transport, the same type of vessel that had carried, ironically enough, the cadet group of Squall, Zell, and Seifer to Dollet, was normally piloted by three, an actual pilot, a navigator, and a communications tech. Currently, Kai was doing all three, although he had made it easier by wiring the comms and navigation systems into a laptop that he had connected to the pilot's station. Kai was watching his displays, humming a tune that Quistis did not recognize, and she found herself thinking about the way Kai had handled everything that had come at him during the briefing the day before. He had been at the library when Eric had found him, taking a few underclassmen to school at a game of Triple Triad, and when Quistis arrived, Kai had already, over the Garden net, had gotten the ball rolling on getting the assault boat ready. He had thrown a bit of authority around in her name at the technicians, true, but she was willing to forgive him for his initiative. During the briefing, which had not been much-she had kept it to what she knew and not getting too deep into her past with Aileen- Kai had been the one who had asked the good questions. Eric had been silent-he hid it well, but he had to be hurting from his burns-and Aiko was as unreadable as ever. Once, Quistis had assumed that Aiko had been sleeping in class-she had covered her face with a print-out-and she had decided to quiz her errant student. Aiko had answered her question perfectly, startling Quistis. Of course, she found out later that Aiko had done it to get her to assume that she was always awake, so she could sleep, and eventually Quistis had caught her. Aiko hadn't put a book over her face in the library, true, she had only spotted a good looking guy and had said "Good grief, what a hunk," during the briefing. Quistis guessed that for Aiko, that was behaving.

They had left Balamb-the town, not the Garden-at just past sunrise, Kai having dismissed the crew that Squall had assigned to the boat by saying that he would handle it. Quistis, who could handle some of the duties involved in piloting the boat, had allowed it, and the three crew members had left before anyone changed their minds. There had been an interesting moment as Kai had asked Eric and Aiko to load his computer gear-judging by the number of boxes, Kai had brought a mainframe computer with him-and while Eric had agreed, Aiko had merely yawned at him and had gotten on the boat. Eric had shaken his head, more in disbelief that Kai had asked Aiko to do something before the sun had come up than at Aiko's antics. Quistis, who had had another restless night of reliving the battle at the fire cavern, had let it go, not up to the challenge of Aiko at the moment. Squall

and Rinoa had seen them off, which had been entertaining to say the least. Squall had been trying his best to get her to reconsider the mission, while Rinoa, who hadn't seen Quistis since before the attack, was full of sympathy and concern. Their departure from Balamb had been less a beginning and more an escape. She had hoped to lose herself in duty during the four-hour journey to Dollet, but Kai's skills had denied her that. So she had time to think. Too much time to think, in fact.

She found herself thinking about Aileen, not so much in terms of her death-

(and I wasn't even there, anyway.)

but rather in terms of the good. Aileen had been a good friend and a better SeeD, her only weakness a certain vanity that the lovely girl had been entitled to and would probably outgrow.

(I was there when she died, Eric.)

Whatever she had been thinking suddenly faded away in a burst of shock. Goose bumps rose on her arms as she realized some of the things that she had said to Eric. Two nights ago, she had told Eric that she had not been present when Aileen had died. She had said that with total certainty, and yet she had said that she had witnessed Aileen's death and could even tell Squall that it had been her second mission that she had died on. So which is it, Quistis? she asked herself. Why haven't you thought about Aileen for years, why did you think that she had died somewhere else, and how did you remember it now? A sharp pain filled her head, the same that she had felt yesterday, and it was no wonder when Kai looked up from his station and said "Are you all right, Quistis? You don't look good."

Quistis rubbed at her temples, trying to will the pain away. "I don't feel good, Kai. I'll feel better when all of this is over." She stood up, taking a second to get her sea legs under her. "I'm going downstairs. Yell if there's trouble."

"Sure thing, Quistis." Kai watched her go, partly out of concern, a bit because, well, she made that long pink skirt she liked to wear walk and talk. Once Quistis had reached the bay below, Kai turned back to his screens and sighed. I am really going to hate to do this, he thought.

The bay below was designed to hold as many as ten SeeDs and their equipment, so even with Kai's gear piled in a corner, it looked empty. Aiko was lying on the bench that ran down the left side of the bay, her long legs up on the seat. She was wearing a midnight blue version of the outfit that she had worn the day before with a leather jacket decked out in military styled braids and trim. Her current preferred weapon, a heavy combat staff, lay on the deck beside her. Unlike most SeeDs, who picked a single weapon and specialized in it, Aiko changed weapons with the whimsy that marked most of her life. She was wearing oversized sunglasses and was snoring loudly, not that Quistis believed she was really asleep. Eric sat directly opposite of Aiko, his sword on his lap; as Quistis watched, Eric lifted it and began to sharpen it with a whetstone. In all her time with SeeD, Quistis had never seen a weapon quite like Eric's sword. It was beautiful, if a weapon could be said to be that. The grip ended in a silver metal ball, from which flared the hilts, shaped like two wings

that could only be those of an angel. The blade was four and a half feet long; at its base, it was a diamond, wider at the base than at the apex. The blade gradually narrowed to a width of a few inches, silver, with a black metal tip. Running down the center of the diamond were a series of letters that were almost runes, in a language that she did not recognize. Quistis decided that she would start solving the mysteries in her life by going after a simple one. She took a seat beside of Eric and remarked "It doesn't look like it can get dull."

Eric ran the whetstone down one edge with a practiced motion, nodding. Quistis saw, belatedly, that Eric wasn't wearing his uniform. This wasn't due to a spectacular lack of attention to her surroundings-under the circumstances, it would be justified-but rather due to what Eric wore. The pants he wore were cut nearly the same as the uniform, the black t-shirt he wore was Garden issue and the black jacket with yellow trim across the shoulders and down the arms sure looked like an uniform jacket. That must be his idea of casual, she mused. "I prefer not to take chances," he told her. "I've had this sword for a long time."

"Really?" Quistis decided to go for it. "Does it have a name?"

"Actually, yes. I just have good reason to keep it quiet."

"This should be good." She leaned closer to him. "Come on, don't tell a lady something like that and leave her hanging. What kind of name can a sword have that's that bad?"

Eric sighed. He laid the blade down on the deck before him and put the whetstone away in a duffle bag that was next to him on the bench. "It's not a bad name. Just an ironic one."

"An ironic name? How ironic could a sword's name be?"

Unnoticed across the bay, Aiko's violet eyes peered out from under the top of her sunglasses.

Eric wrestled with the idea of not telling Quistis-he had hidden the name of his sword since hearing the story of Squall and Rinoa's romance upon his arrival at Balamb Garden-and gave up. He knew things about Quistis that few others did, and it seemed only fair that he tell her this. "All right," he began, picking the weapon up, "I'll tell you. Its called Grieving Angel."

Quistis understood his point. "Grieving Angel," she said, knowingly. To one who knew Squall and Rinoa, that name was ironic indeed; Griever was the lion GF whose image was practically Squall's emblem, while angels had long been associated with sorcery, and as she had thought the day before, Rinoa was still a sorceress. Plus angel wings were practically a fashion motif for Rinoa. "If you don't mind me asking, what possessed you to name it that?"

"Nothing did. It's always been called Grieving Angel. It was called that when my father bore it and his father as well. It's been in my family for a long time, hundreds of years if my father was right."

"It's that old?" Quistis asked wonderingly.

"If you believe my father. It's supposed to be an Alfredsson family tradition that the oldest male child is the owner of Grieving Angel." Eric took the blade and placed it in the sheath, which lay on the other side of the duffle bag. "I don't know if that is true. However, I have seen old photos of my great grandfather, and if he didn't have Grieving Angel with him in those pictures, it was a sword that looked just like it."

"So why not just tell everyone the name of your sword and it's history?"

Eric had a reasonable answer for that. "I don't like to talk about my family. My father died a few years ago, and my mother was already dead when that happened. Plus who would believe it?"

Quistis had just learned more about Eric in five minutes than she had as his teacher for months. She was beginning to believe that there were more depths to the serious young warrior than she had ever imagined. She was beginning to like being around him; his calm manner was almost soothing. She decided that it was only fair to tell him the real reason why she had come down here. "Eric, I'm worried. Worried about me, about a lot of things."

Eric stared calmly at her. "You have quite a bit to worry about. What's the biggest problem?"

"The fact that two days ago I told you I wasn't there when Aileen died and yesterday I did."

(is this really necessary?)

(yes, doctor. The girl has great potential)

Quistis went silent. Just what I need now, she thought. More voices in my head. These, oddly enough, were soothing to her, unlike the ones that she associated with Aileen. "Eric, I don't know if what I told you about Aileen is true. I could be wrong that it's her. We could lose against her if we make any mistakes."

"Well, that's true in any case, isn't it? Quistis, we didn't really have a choice here. Whatever we fought yesterday has gone to Dollet if we can believe it. The Dollet Dukedom has one of the weakest armies in the world, and this thing would probably go through them like a hot knife through butter. We had to go."

"True. I-I just worry that I might be forgetting something that's important. Sometimes I wish I wasn't junctioning GF. It ruins your memory."

Eric had to agree with that. "Maybe. But we'd be outclassed without the GF."

"We might be with them." Quistis slid so she was sitting just beside of him. A distant part of her wondered what she was doing. "I've never seen power like hers."

Eric felt Quistis' hip against his and tried to figure out what was going on here. He found he had no idea. "We haven't lost yet," he said. "The last time she had the advantage of surprise. We have to

take the advantage back."

Quistis nodded in agreement. "I think I taught you that, didn't I?" She was at a loss for why she was behaving as she was with Eric. She supposed that it was the sense of calm he brought to her. She resolved, however, to leave it at that.

Aiko, thankfully, made it a moot point. She yawned, stretching her arms over her head in such a way that any man could not help but notice, and lifted the sunglasses so she could see. Quistis had managed to put some space between her and Eric in time, which probably amused him to no good end. She was also starting to understand that Eric had a sense of humor; he just hid it well. "What did I miss?" Aiko asked.

"Not much," Quistis said, rising regally to her feet. "I'm going to check on Kai." She left the bay as quickly as she could without seeming obvious, a bit less worried about some things yet now puzzled about others.

Aiko sat up and gave Eric the widest grin that she could. "You know, I'm starting to think all those rumors about you and her are turning into self-fulfilling prophecies." Eric scowled at her and she decided that it was better to stay quiet. About that at least. "She's really messed up. Did she say all the things that she said?"

"She did. I thought there was something odd when she told me how Aileen Navarre died, I just couldn't place it. Of course, I had just been involved in a battle, soâ€¦" He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Aiko. We're going to war here and we don't have all the facts. It's not right."

"You'll do just fine, hotshot. In fact, my combat plan is to just throw up a Protect or Shell spell and stand behind you." Aiko actually was not that bad in combat-the only training battles that she had lost were to Eric and to Quistis-and most cadets had learned to respect her hand to hand skills. Still, she knew when she was outclassed, and where Eric was concerned, she was."It's not going to be that bad, is it?" she asked. Eric did not answer, lost in thought. "It is that bad. So I'm probably not going to get a chance to try the beaches of Dollet, then? Too bad, 'cause I packed a wicked bikini."

Eric knew better than to ask if Aiko was joking. His eyes followed the path that Quistis had taken to leave the bay, a pleasant confusion filling him. I've known her for months and she hasn't gotten anymore beautiful than she already was, he thought. What is wrong with me?

Aiko plopped down beside of him in a sprawl of arms and legs. She elbowed him in the ribs hard enough to make him wince. "And what's this with telling Quistis about Grieving Angel? You hid that for a lot more reasons than the stupid ones you gave her."

Eric's eyes were distant now, contemplative. Aiko had a good idea of what was on his mind. "I'm a little sick of hiding things, Aiko. That's all." Aiko found that she could not argue with that.

The wind blew through Quistis' hair, sea water splashing against the sloped hull of the transport's deck gun turret. She laid a hand

against the grips of the double-barreled cannon, remembering the mission to Dollet that had seen Squall, Selphie, and Zell become SeedS. She had manned the deck gun against a mechanical monster that the Galbadian Army had sent after them, pumping hundreds of high-explosive armor piercing rounds into the X-ATM092's hull until it had finally exploded. Saved Squall's life, she thought. All in the name of duty. She looked towards the horizon, the barest hint that land was there just becoming apparent. She had by-passed the bridge and had chosen the solitude of the deck to try to order her thoughts. It wasn't proving easy. Why couldn't I remember how Aileen died until she came back? she thought. In fact, until that night at the Nest, at the secret place, she hadn't thought of Aileen for years. What happened to me?

(Quistis! She's down! Do something!)

(Aileen! Clear us a path!)

Quistis was becoming so used to hearing voices in her head that she barely reacted anymore. She recognized the first voice as being Aileen's, the second hers. There had been a battle—no, an ambush—and

(I promise that it won't hurt anymore. I promise, Quistis.)

—and she had given Aileen an order while she had

(the subject's will is a considerable obstacle, yet it can be overcome.)

A wave splashed over the hull, probably caused by a larger swell, and Quistis barely managed to avoid being drenched by it. The last thing that she needed after yesterday was to be soaked again. It would be terribly ironic if she missed her date with destiny due to having a cold. As she counted her blessings, the intercom in the turret beeped for her attention. She touched the button that activated it and said "Yes?"

"Kai here. We've already been contacted by the Dollet harbormaster. Seems that Squall called ahead to inform local authorities of our arrival, and the Dollet Royal Military Police are expecting a word with the commanding officer."

Quistis almost laughed at the pretentiousness of that. While it was true that Dollet was a dukedom, and in theory could claim to use the title "royal" in front of a police force, the fact of the matter remained that the RMP was not exactly an elite organization. Had Quistis had her way, they would not have been informed of her presence, but non-contracted SeedS floating around a foreign country tended to make that country a bit nervous. It was SOP for Garden, since the end of the Third Sorceress War, to notify a sovereign government of the activities of Seed within their borders. If her luck was bad, the RMP would insist on complete oversight of her mission. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Yes. They've requested that we berth in the military docks. It was the kind of request that was really an order. You'll meet with an RMP representative then. Someone named Commander Allin Fullar."

"That's just lovely," Quistis groaned.

"Just don't kill the messenger for the bad news. Kai out."

I really don't need this right now, she thought. Someone else trying to nose into my business. Too many people are already in harm's way. She took one last look to the horizon and retreated to the deck below.

Dollet was not well known for the size of its navy-in fact, the few ships that it had were better equipped to serve as a coast guard rather than a full-fledged fleet-so Quistis was not terribly impressed by the docks that the harbormaster directed them to. They were not all that much bigger than the ones back at Balamb, and the assortment of vessels there did not exactly send a tremble of fear up her spine. In fact, the most impressive one was a twenty-year old Galbadian design, a destroyer that the Galbadians had sold to Dollet just before the start of the War. The berth that the harbormaster had designated for them was adjacent to the destroyer's, and Quistis somehow doubted that was an accident. She watched the dock come closer through a screen showing a view from a hull mounted camera and noticed a man in the grey and red uniform of the RMP standing amidst the dock workers who were preparing to tie the boat up. She called for a close-up on him; he was blond haired, blue-eyed, and had the kind of pinched, nervous features that made Quistis wonder why he had chosen law enforcement as a profession. If that isn't Fullar, she thought, then I'm not Head Instructor. "Kai. Once you get us docked, pull up Aileen's records. I need the address of any of her relatives still in Dollet, starting with her parents."

Kai held up a sheet of paper. "Already done. Your radios are set to SeeD frequency 103-did that last night-down in the combat bay."

Quistis took the sheet from him as she passed by, going down to the bay. "You never cease to amaze me, Kai."

"Wish I heard that from women more often," he lamented. He had been granted access to Aileen Navarre's school records by Quistis during the briefing last night. Curiously, she had not wanted to read them, nor did he have the exact circumstances of her death. Yet, he corrected himself. There was a lot of data that he intended to acquire, as soon as Quistis was not paying attention. A man does not survive without information, Kai thought. Eric and Aiko stood by the access hatch, both already wearing the earbead radios that were now standard issue for SeeDs. They picked up subvocal vibrations through bone induction and the frequencies were changed by voice code, and were, not surprisingly, from Esthar. Eric had a clear plastic box that contained hers, which he gave to her. Aiko gave her an odd little look and said " You know, I call this little baby, uh, Bloodwhacker." She raised her staff.

Quistis, who understood the point that Aiko was trying to make, favored her with a disarming smile. "Did you just make that up?"

"Of course I did. Just getting into the spirit of things. Confession and all that."

Quistis inserted the earbead into her left ear, activating it by her body heat. "Commo check. Kai, you reading me?"

"Five by five." One function of the earbead was that no matter what volume that the speaker used, Quistis heard it in a quiet, level tone. Esthar was so far ahead of the rest of the world that at times it was frightening. "We're at the dock. I'll pop the hatch when the boat's tied down."

"Over." She turned to Eric. "Once we deal with the RMP, we're heading to Aileen's parents. They live here-Aileen's, her benefits are still being sent here." Kai had told her that last night to confirm that the Navarres still lived in Dollet. She hadn't wanted to look at Aileen's files. Had not dared to, in fact. "I hope that she won't use them, but why else would she bring me here?"

"She could be leading you by the nose," Aiko said. "Making you think she's in her hometown for a certain reason when there's really another one." Quistis regarded Aiko with a slight species of amazement. Aiko grinned and said "Eric isn't the only thinker around here."

"You have a point," Quistis admitted reluctantly. "Still, we don't have much to go on. We have to play the hand that we're dealt." The boat rocked, gently, signaling that the journey had ended. As he had promised, Kai opened the hatch, calling "You kids take care."

The man in the RMP uniform practically teleported into the path at the end of the extendible gangway, standing in their way as if his mere presence was a barrier to their power. Quistis prepared to address him when he faced Eric and said "Mr. Alfredsson, is it not? I was notified of the arrival of your unit by the Balamb Garden Combat Master. Might I have a moment of your time?"

Eric looked terribly puzzled, caught off guard by what he had heard. For her part, though, Quistis knew what Squall was doing. Telling the RMP that Eric was in command was Squall's way of letting her know that he knew what she was trying to do, of how she had manipulated events. Eric quickly recovered and replied. "Certainly, ahâ€|.and you are?"

"Commander Allin Fullar, Dollet Royal Military Police. I have been informed that your presence in Dollet is non-contractual."

"It is. We have reason to believe that there is a threat against SeeD that has made it's way to Dollet. "

Fullar's eyebrows rose expressively. "A threat against SeeD? Perhaps this matter is best investigated in a cooperative manner."

"SeeD has jurisdiction," Quistis interjected. Fullar turned to her, a bit taken aback. "Under the Accords that ended the Third Sorceress War, SeeD has the authority to deal with any abnormal threat to the security of the world. That language was introduced to the accords in order to grant SeeD the exclusive authority to deal with sorcery, but it definitely applies here."

Fullar gathered his thoughts before mounting a counteroffensive. "I only have your word that there is a threat that qualifies under the extra-normal threat clause of the Accords. Until such information is supplied, the RMP can not see SeeDs operating in Dollet."

"I respect your professionalism, Commander Fullar." Quistis played

her hole card. "However, there is a credible, legitimate threat to Dollet, and if we-if Mr. Alfredsson's squad-are delayed in the investigation of the threat, I assure you that the RMP will be held responsible by SeeD, and by Esthar." The last was something of a bluff; Laguna was President of Esthar, true, however, he was not the only force in the government. SeeD had his support, not the entire country. Quistis could tell that it was working, if the expression on Fullar's face was any indication. He looked as if he was trying to work out an extremely complicated physics problem with a pencil, his lower lip practically twitching. Quistis chose to be diplomatic. "Our mission here is largely diplomatic, Commander Fullar. Rest assured that we will call on you if need be."

That seemed to do Fullar in; his shoulders slumped in a sign of defeat. He looked to Eric and, in a sad tone, said "Do you always let your subordinates handle all your matters, Mr. Alfredsson?" Eric did not reply. Fullar began to walk away from the boat. "Follow me. Your Combat Master arranged a vehicle for you, and there's a reservation in Mr. Alfredsson's name at the Dollet Inn in the event this mission goes long."

Aiko clapped her hands with mock glee. "A reservation! Oh, please, Mr. Alfredsson, let's go straight to the Inn!" Eric stared daggers at her, which silenced her. To Quistis, he said "Nice bit of politics, if I do say so myself."

"Thank you. Kai, this is Quistis. We're moving out. Keep an eye on our signal-if someone listens in, let me know."

"You got it, Quistis." Aboard the boat, Kai watched as the trio followed Fullar out of the dock area on the hull cameras. Once they were out of sight, Kai turned back to his screens, thinking dark thoughts as the file on Aileen Navarre appeared on one of the monitors. He paged through the report until he found the same contract number that Squall had read the day before. He accessed the Garden database via the boat's combat internet and got to work on the task that he had been assigned, by Squall himself, after the briefing the night before. Kai was not fond of hiding things from his friends, and if that was part of being a SeeD, the thought of resignation was sorely tempting.

Quistis was not terribly surprised to find that the vehicle that Fullar had given them was a rather basic automobile, one that screamed "government car" from every inch of its bland lines. Aiko gave it an once-over before saying "Bet it doesn't have air conditioning." True to form, she walked over to it and kicked the tires. Fullar's defeated face fell even further. "What kind of gas mileage does it get?"

Eric diverted attention away from Aiko's performance by saying to Fullar " Does it have a radio? We'll need to contact you in the event that we need your assistance." Grateful to have a semblance of normalcy, Fullar leaned into the car and explained the functions of a radio that Eric had mastered in the same courses that had taught Kai how to pilot most vehicles. Once he was done, Eric thanked him politely and told Quistis, staying in character as "commander" of the squad, to drive. She saluted him with a trace of sarcasm and got into the car. Aiko called out "I'm riding shotgun!" and took the front passenger seat before Eric could move. Fullar did not speak, for which Eric was grateful. He managed to get into the back seat of the

car without too much difficulty, and Quistis drove away. "What are your orders, sir?" Quistis called. Eric did not answer. Operating under standing operating procedure, she sent out a sub-vocal message over the earbeads. "Let's assume this car is bugged. Subvocal commo on the mission only." SeeD did not have enemies per se, but as a mercenary organization had earned the distrust of most of the world at one time or another. Putting surveillance on them was not out of the question. "Aiko, this car has a map system built in." She handed Aiko the print out with the addresses on it. "Get me a route to the primary address."

Aiko booted up the somewhat obsolete mapping system on the dashboard and typed in the first address. A holographic map of Dollet appeared over the windshield, and a red line ran through it, going from the docks, through the center of town, and towards the base of the hills that overlooked Dollet. "Hmm. That's a pretty swank neighborhood. Was Aileen rich?" Aiko wondered.

"Her family was. They were opposed to her becoming a SeeD, thought it was beneath her." Quistis turned the car onto the main cobble stone street that ran through downtown Dollet, seeing only a few signs of the damage caused during the rampage of the X-ATM092 during the Galbadian invasion of Dollet. "She told me that her father was a doctor with a fair amount of prestige here, and he hated the idea of his daughter becoming a soldier for hire."

"Morals for sale," Eric said distantly. He had removed Grieving Angel from it's place over his back and held it across his knees. Quistis gave him an odd look in the rear view mirror, expecting him to say more. He did not. I wonder what's that's all about, she thought. Unexpected depths, indeed.

They drove through Dollet, surprisingly not being followed by anyone, until they reached a neighborhood of townhouses, each of a similar design. Quistis had been expecting Fullar to dispatch someone to track them, to keep an eye on non-contract SeeDs, and she could not help but wonder why he hadn't done so. Her heart was uncharacteristically pounding in her chest as the numbers of the addresses grew closer to that of Aileen's parents' home. Eric had not spoken since his comment on Aileen's father, and even the exuberant Aiko had quieted. We all feel it in the air, she thought. Something is going to happen. She spotted the appropriate address on a sign on a wrought-iron fence and slowed to a stop. The townhouse was three stories tall, the front a brick facade, matching the color of the cobblestones of the road. As a disquieting start, the gate was open, swinging in a light breeze. Quistis turned off the car's engine and called Kai. "We're at the Navarres. Stand by."

"I've got your back, Quistis."

The group got out of the car, trying to be as unobtrusive as you could be armed in the middle of a high-income neighborhood. "All right," Quistis said. "Before we go in, check your junctions. I know you two should only have access to Ifrit, Shiva, and Quezacotl, but don't underestimate what they can do for you." She checked her junctions, making certain that her abilities were maximized for the coming battle. Once certain, she stepped into the courtyard in front of the Navarre residence, her hand on Save the Queen. Eric and Aiko followed, both of them quartering the area, searching for signs of an ambush. Down the street, they heard the sound of a dog barking, which

seemed somewhat surreal given the tension in the air. They reached the front door, and Quistis was not shocked to see that the door was open a crack. Your play book is filled with clichés, Aileen. "Hello?" she called, "is anyone there?" No answer, just silence. Eric drew his sword and subvocalized "She's here. I can feel it." Quistis nodded and shouldered the door open. The entrance hall was empty, brightly lit by lamps that were mounted in the wall. Eric entered, his sword held at the ready. Quistis took the right side, leaving Aiko the rear. A set of stairs stood to the left, but Quistis was not quite ready to go upstairs yet. There was a room to the right that seemed to be a sitting room of some sort, and Quistis tried that. There was no one there, although on a table Aiko found a newspaper dated that day, the morning edition. She held it up and said "Wonder if I won the lottery?"

Quistis continued out of the sitting room, finding herself in a den. Sitting on the couch directly opposite of the door were two people, a man and a woman, dressed in clothes recognizable as Dollet high fashion. She supposed they were Aileen's parents-the hair seemed to match the pictures that Aileen had shown her-but the fact that their faces were missing allowed her to have some margin of error. "Don't think we won the lottery, Aiko," she replied. She could not believe that Aileen had done this, had murdered her parents. "We have to find her. Eric, you take the second floor, I'll take the third. Aiko, finish the first. If you find her, feel free to yell for help." Aiko, who could not take her eyes off the Navarres, nodded dully. Eric left like a shadow, slipping back out the door they'd entered. Quistis turned to follow him to the stairs when she saw that Aiko wasn't moving. "You all right, Aiko?"

Aiko had to tear her eyes away from the carnage. "No. Not really." She raised her staff. "Your friend is really messed up." She made her way around the couch for a door on the far side of the room. Remembering the first time she had seen someone who had died a violent death, Quistis could only be sympathetic. SeeD expects so much of people who are still growing up, she mused. She turned and left the den behind, certain that she would carry some small part of it

(like her like you carried Aileen hidden inside you)

for the rest of her life.

Aiko leaned against the jamb of the door that she had exited through, breathing deeply. In all her life, she had never been so fundamentally violated, for lack of a better term, by something that she had seen. Death in battle was something that every SeeD accepted as a possibility, and only the most idealistic believed that only warriors died in war. This was not a case of civilians dying because war had overrun their homes; this was something darker, more evil. More personal. She tried to put it behind her and went down the carpeted hall she was in, hoping for the best. The hallway led her to a kitchen, one that would rival that of the cafeteria back at Balamb Garden. She looked around, her senses screaming danger, and she was not satisfied when she saw nothing. She went to the refrigerator and opened it, half expecting to find a severed head or limb, and a giggle escaped her as she saw nothing but food. "You're losing it, Aiko." she whispered. She closed the door, and felt more than sensed a blur of motion behind her. She whirled to find herself eye to eye with a bloody face, eyes wide in death. She back pedalled away,

running into the refrigerator. Somehow, someone had hung the corpse of a woman dressed in a maid's uniform by her ankles to a light fixture above. Aiko slid down the refrigerator until she sat on the floor, trying to comprehend what could have left such a gruesome calling card behind without her seeing it. What are we up against? she thought.

On the second floor, Eric was following a series of bloody hand prints that were at roughly shoulder height. He should have been scared, or at least nervous; most seventeen year old fighters would have some jitters. Instead, he felt a supreme sense of calm as he went down the hall, Grieving Angel in front of him. He knew that Aileen was here—the same cold feeling that he'd had in his very soul back at Balamb Garden before she had made her appearance was back—and for some reason, that cold focused him, gave him purpose. The hand prints spelled out a language of murder, leading him to a window that looked out over the courtyard. The last hand print was on the window sill, and Eric touched it with the tip of his sword. As he did, a shape, a black shadow, blurred by, heading upstairs. "Quistis!" he yelled, spinning to run back down the hall, "something's coming your way!"

Quistis had reached the third floor, which was filled with bedrooms, when Eric called. As much of her that she had focused on the mission, part of her was remembering the stories that Aileen had told her of her childhood. Not the stories of her difficulties with her parents, but the silly ones, of girlish games played in the lap of luxury, of her first kiss when she was ten. How could you do that to your parents, Aileen? she thought. "Quistis! Do you read me!" Eric yelled. Quistis did, yet for some reason, she could not answer. She found herself standing in front of a door, one with a brass doorknob. Lost in a sudden flood of memory, lost in something that she could not put a word on, Quistis reached out and opened the door.

Aileen stood there, wearing a knee-length blue dress that Quistis recognized from a photograph of Aileen's. She held a hand up at arm's length, and a ball of energy appeared there. "Goodbye, Quistis," she said, unleashing her power at the young woman who stood only three feet away from her.

To be continued.

5. Scarred

> <meta name="Generator"> Part Four: Scarred

Kindred Spirits Part Four: Scarred

The explosion shook the Navarre home to the foundations, shattering every window and blowing the lights out; the blast tore a hole the size of an automobile through the side of the house, scattering debris into the street. It knocked Eric, who had reached the top of the stairs, off his feet, and managed to get Aiko to pay attention to something else other than the corpse. Eric bounded to his feet, Grieving Angel in his hand; all that he could see at the end of the hallway was smoke billowing from a irregular hole to his left. "Quistis!" he shouted, sliding to a halt. A shadowy form appeared in the cloud, and Eric's blood went cold. The silhouette was not that of Quistis, and the high, vicious laugh that came to him was terribly

familiar. Aileen Navarre, wearing a blue dress, stepped through the cloud, her beauty only matched by the evil in her eyes. She gave Eric an evil smile and said "The boyfriend. You're late again." She indicated the destruction behind her with a casual thumb. "You could say that she walked right into it. Poor little Quistis."

A rare fury filled Eric's soul, and he prepared to leap into battle. Aileen saw the change in his expression and laughed. "You weren't fond of her, were you? Of that conniving little bitch?" She shook her head. "I will never understand why so many people worshipped her. What do you see in her?"

"What did she do to you that was so terrible?" Eric asked. "Why did she deserve what you did to her?"

Aileen put both of her hands behind her back and struck a pose that under other circumstances would have been terribly cute. "It wasn't so much what she did as what she didn't do. What, she didn't tell such a fine looking man what happened? Maybe I was giving her some credit. Bedroom eyes like yours, I'd tell you anything." She raised her arms over her head, energy arcing between her fingertips. "I might leave enough of you to play with, pretty boy."

With a thunderous crack, the tip of Save the Queen flashed out of the dwindling cloud of smoke. It caught Aileen in the back of her head, driving her forward. She tried to turn and the chain whip cracked again, smashing into her forehead and knocking her to the floor. Stunned, Eric watched as Quistis stepped forward, unscathed. "Nice try, Aileen. A pity that I adjusted my junctioned abilities for Auto-Shell, or I'd be dead." Eric remembered the order that she had given them before they had entered the house. She set up Auto-Shell through her junction with Doomtrain, he thought. Crafty little lady. "Give it up, Aileen. This time I'm ready for you."

"You wish, Quistis." Aileen vanished in a blur of speed, reappearing behind Quistis in a heartbeat. Eric fully expected for the same thing that had happened to him at the fire cavern to happen to Quistis, but like Aileen, he had underestimated the Head Instructor. She caught Aileen with a perfectly timed elbow to the face, leaped backward, and cast a Firaga spell at her. She did not expect it to work-Aileen had seemed rather resistant to harm-but she had a plan. "Eric!" she yelled, and the swordsman was already in motion, ducking the flames that her spell had caused and slashing at Aileen with such force that she flew the length of the hall and out the shattered window. Eric kept moving, Quistis falling into step beside of him. "You know, I thought you were dead," he told her.

"Careful, Eric. That calm façade of yours is cracking." They reached the window to find Aileen standing on the ground below, both arms raised. Quistis had time to say "Oh, crap," before Aileen began hurling blasts of energy their way. Without thinking, Eric and Quistis dove out the window, rolling as they landed. Quistis stood and used one of her odder Blue Magics, Micro Missiles. Trying to explain how she had gained the gift to imitate certain attacks-some natural, some mechanical-tended to give even her a headache. As a rain of missiles poured down on Aileen, she found that she did not care how it worked so long as it did. The impacts drove Aileen back, misses tearing craters in the immaculately groomed lawn, yet it was quickly apparent that it wasn't working. Aileen regained her footing, howled with rage, and more or less flew at them. She hurled a blast

of power at them, which they managed to avoid. It soared into the neighboring home and exploded, which, had anyone not managed to notice it, awoke everyone in the area. Aileen flashed towards Quistis, faster than she could react, and punched her squarely in the jaw. Eric came up on her backside and ate a kick to his jaw that snapped his teeth together. Quistis cracked Save the Queen at Aileen's pivot leg, tripping her. Eric slashed at Aileen with Grieving Angel, which she rolled to escape. She stood and screamed incoherently, the force of her power driving Eric and Quistis back. "You two have no idea what you're up against, do you?" she snarled.

"Not really." A bolt of lightning, the sign of a Thunder spell, struck Aileen square in the chest, as the speaker, Aiko, ran out of the house, spinning her staff over her head. Aileen turned just as Aiko teed off with the staff, hitting Aileen in the head with a sickening crack. She gave Aileen a back flip kick for emphasis and landed beside of Quistis and Eric. "Did I miss much?" she asked.

"Just the warm up," Quistis answered. "I think we're about to see the main event."

Aileen rose to her feet. "Three SeedS against pretty little me. The odds are getting nearly even." She waved an arm at the wrought iron fence and it blew out into the street. "Catch me if you can, Quistis," she cried, and bolted out the gap in the fence. Quistis swore to herself and followed. "Kai, we're under fire! Any response from the RMP yet!"

"You're lucky that I hacked into their commo. You've got emergency services and RMP tactical inbound."

"Damnit." She sprinted around the corner and found that, as she had feared, that the streets were filling with people, wondering what has going on. Aileen whirled on her and unleashed a blast of energy that her Shell spell absorbed. This makes things more complicated, she thought.

Behind her, Eric was preparing to join the fight when Aiko took him by the wrist. "Eric, it's time to stop sandbagging. You can't beat her as a Seed."

"Had to happen sooner or later," he said. He bounded out into the street and was amazed to see Quistis easily dodging Aileen's blasts, moving in nearly a blur. She adjusted her junctions to favor speed, Eric thought. A doubly crafty lady. "We need to clear the crowd, Aiko. When Quistis gives you a shot, summon Quezacotl-a GF should drive most people to cover."

"Right," Aiko did one more thing to prepare herself, then waited for the opening. Disdaining spells or Blue Magic, Quistis attacked Aileen physically, mixing kicks and savage punches with shots from her whip. Aiko could not figure if Quistis was trying to keep the battle on a physical level to prevent Aileen from using her power or just because she was mad. Aiko guessed it was a bit of both. For thirty seconds, Quistis held the advantage, until she missed a kick. Aileen blasted Quistis aside with a beam of power that sent her crashing into the windshield of a parked car. Well, there's my opening. Aiko ordered her mind and called out "Thunder Storm!" the name of the attack used

by Quezacotl. For a second, she felt the crackling electrical force of the GF in her mind—and then all she felt was pain. She screamed and dropped to her knees, Eric there at once. "Aiko—what's wrong?!"

"Don't know—I can't contact the GF."

"Kai!" Eric called. "Something's wrong with Aiko!"

"Man you keep me jumping!" Kai was able to monitor the biological functions of SeeDs in the field via the incredibly versatile earbeads, and he quickly determined the problem. "Let's see, her brain waves indicate that something is interrupting the summoning process. She needs to stop summoning the GF."

"Already did that," she gasped. "Eric, go get her—I'll catch up."

Eric looked up and saw that Quistis was still struggling to stand while Aileen was building her power around her, enough to make the ground shake. Distantly he heard sirens wailing, far away. He had a decision to make, and quite frankly he did not see that he had much of a choice. I hope you're happy, Father, he thought.

Quistis tried to blink away the double vision that her collision with the car had caused, faintly aware that the left side of her rib cage burned with pain. She stood unsteadily, realizing that whatever Aileen was building; it was more than her Shell could withstand. Aileen lifted her hands above her head, and shouted, "I see you're going to die on your feet, Quistis. Goodbye!" She unleashed a monstrous bolt of power that tore the cobblestones free and seared the very air, and Quistis wondered if her number was up.

Eric Alfredsson had other ideas.

Appearing from out of nowhere, he held Grieving Angel vertically in front of him, Aileen's bolt striking it and stopping dead. Eric dug his feet in for a second, then, howling, he slashed with the sword, sending Aileen's attack skyward. It raced into the clouds and exploded with a thunderclap that echoed for miles. Aileen sneered at Eric, her hands clenching and unclenching. "The boyfriend. Won't you just get out of my way?"

"I'm not her boyfriend," Eric replied calmly. "Yet. You ready to dance?"

She crooked a finger at him. "You lead, pretty boy." As she did, her flesh seemed to ripple, and grey plates rose out of her forearms. She held a hand out at her hip and a sword, which seemed to be a living thing, the blade twisted, organic tendrils twisting from the blade to the grip, appeared out of thin air. What is she? Quistis thought. Is she Aileen? Eric did not seem to care; he just lifted Grieving Angel and charged, moving faster than anyone, even Squall, that she had ever seen. Aileen met him with a slash of her sword; Eric parried the strike and they went at it in a clash of blades. Eric forced Aileen back, feinted low, then went for her heart. She blocked it with the plate that had grown out of her right arm and responded with a strike meant to disembowel Eric. He moved aside in a blur of movement and went for Aileen's unprotected back; she managed to parry the attack by throwing her sword over her shoulder. Completing the motion, she

turned and fired a ball of energy at point blank range at Eric-and he dodged it. The ball soared down the street and had the great misfortune of hitting the first RMP vehicle that blew around the corner, destroying it. Eric kicked Aileen in the jaw, sending her soaring. Where the hell is he getting his power from? Quistis wondered. She had watched Eric for all of his time at Balamb Garden, and while he was easily the strongest cadet during his time there, his power was not all that great even compared to hers. Even Selphie should be stronger than him, just based on her junctions, she knew, and Selphie wasn't known for her power. Where does it come from?

Her questions turned to confusion as Eric crossed his arms over his chest, concentrating, and a blue-white aura appeared around him. The roadway beneath him cracked and shook as Eric built a force that Quistis was in awe of. She cast a Scan spell on him and was stunned to find that his power level had increased five times above the level that he normally demonstrated. Aileen got to her feet and actually smiled, as if she had found a worthy challenger. Eric held both of his hands in front of him and a beam of blue-white energy exploded from his hands and raced toward Aileen. It hit her square-on, waves of force washing past her and knocking parked cars over. That's on the level of some of Squall's special attacks, Quistis thought, and I get the feeling he's just getting warmed up.

An explosion rocked the street, now breaking every window for a square mile and nearly deafening everyone within earshot. Aiko had reached Quistis and cast a Cure spell on her, easing the pain in her ribs. "Aiko, how'd he do that?" she shouted over the tumult, not expecting an answer.

"Ask him when we win," she replied.

Eric still stood in a combat stance, watching smoke and fire billow into the skies, and so was not surprised when Aileen stepped forward, revealing herself. The dress she wore was tattered, a tear revealing the better part of a slender leg, but otherwise she was unharmed. "That was fun," she sneered. "I knew you were hiding the bulk of your power, swordsman. If that was your best, though, you're in trouble."

That was the most I could throw at her without causing too much collateral damage, Eric thought. The attack that his father had drilled into him for years before his death burned in his mind, and he disregarded it. Even if he was willing to use it, he did not think he could control the Nova Maelstrom yet. Aileen lifted the sword that she had created and smirked at him. "Are you ready to die?" she asked.

"What kind of stupid question is that?" Eric responded. He tightened his grip on Grieving Angel and rushed to meet her. Aileen blocked his attack with an upward thrust, then went on the offensive, her weapon nearly invisible to the naked eye. To Quistis' amazement, Eric parried every strike, then, after gaining an advantage, mounted a counterattack, actually driving her back. Quistis knew that it would not last; whatever Aileen had become, she did not seem to tire. And Eric, bless him, was only human. "We're going to have to do something," she said to Aiko.

"Well, I have a plan," Aiko replied. "You're going to hit her with the best spell that you have stocked."

"Under these circumstances, that would be Ultima. What kind of plan is that?"

Aiko laughed. "Sorry, forgot my part. Straight out of Instructor Trepe's course on Tactical Usage of Support Magic." She concentrated and cast the spell that she had drawn from Quistis, just before she had tried to summon Quezacotl, on Quistis. "And you thought that I was sleeping in class," Aiko chided her. Quistis smiled and waited for a chance.

Aileen gave her that chance by knocking Eric aside with a brutal blow that he deflected with his sword, the impact still causing him to fall to the street and slide nearly thirty feet away. Quistis stepped to the fore, shouting Aileen's name in a challenge. "Yes, Quistis? Am I hurting your man?" Aileen snarled.

"No. Just my friend." She concentrated on the second most destructive spell that she knew, and cast Ultima at Aileen. A blast of emerald power flashed at and around Aileen, the force making the very ground beneath them shake. Aileen fell back, visibly shaken for the first time in the battle. She looked up to say something, and that was when the Triple spell that Aiko had drawn from Quistis and cast on her took its effect, hammering Aileen with the Ultima spell two more times. Green light filled the skies, and finally, Aileen fell to the ground, crashing to her hands and knees. "Very sneaky, Quistis, very sneaky. Tripling up an Ultima spell," Aileen coughed. "Ultima works very well on me."

Eric closed the distance between him and her in a heartbeat, Grieving Angel held overhead, all his strength behind the blow that he intended to swing at her neck. At the last instant, Aileen's power flared around her, deflecting the blade of the sword. Eric darted aside as Aileen leaped to her feet and soared towards Quistis, hovering inches above the ground. She stopped at an arm's length from Quistis, arms crossed, a wry smile on her face. "It works well for a second or two, I'll grant. And you have gotten stronger since I died. It almost makes for a fair fight when you throw in the pretty boy."

Quistis resisted the urge to strike at Aileen; that had not worked very well thus far. Perhaps if she tried to understand why Aileen had come from beyond the veil of death to try to kill her, she could figure out how to stop her. "Eric asked you something, Aileen, when he thought I was dead. He wanted to know what I had done to you to deserve this. You died on a mission, taking the kind of risks that all SeedS are supposed to."

(she's hurt Quistis you have to do something!)

(the difficulty will be overcoming her guilt. Part of her wants to be blamedâ€¦needs to be blamedâ€¦.)

(this is it the kind of decision that they trained me for this is what I was born to do)

Aileen's head cocked sideways, as if she had heard the tumult of voices that raged inside her head. Perhaps she had. "The missionâ€¦the missionâ€¦I wonder if you really remember the mission, Quisty. Or the choice you made. Maybe killing you now would be

unfair." Aileen began to fade away, turning transparent in front of their eyes. "Perhaps you need to learn a bit before you die." Aileen faded completely away, leaving a brief afterimage in the air and a taste of cold fear in Quistis' mouth. She realized that she could not answer the question that she had asked Aileen because she had no real idea of what the answer could be.

Eric walked over to where she and Aiko were just as a convoy of RMP cars rolled around the corner, passing their fallen comrades in the car Aileen had destroyed; Allin Fullar was clearly visible through the windshield of the lead car. His expression was best described as being irked. "Well, now what?" Eric wondered.

Quistis had no good answer.

Fullar had pitched a perfect blue fit over the destruction of one of Dollet's most upscale neighborhoods, which, under other circumstances, would have been amusing to watch. He had then more or less arrested them, insisting that the three of them go in separate police vehicles to RMP Headquarters. He had mentioned something about them surrendering their weapons, but a single burning glare from Aiko had put an end to that idea. They had been driven down to the headquarters building, a low, three story brick building that matched the local architecture yet hardly looked intimidating in a law enforcement sense. Aiko had amused them, or at least had tried to, by broadcasting her conversation with her driver over the earbuds. They had been marched to an interrogation room, complete with the classic mirror that was, of course, one way glass, and were left to stew there for an hour. Aiko had propped her feet up on a table, made a rude gesture at the "mirror" and had closed her eyes. Eric had gone in a corner and had started reviewing the battle, doubtless finding fault with the fact that they hadn't won, Quistis knew. That had left her, with the mystery of Aileen, and one that had leaped into her mind as she had been driven down to the RMP HQ. Namely, where had Eric, a Level 10 SeeD with only the "starter set" of GF junctions and abilities, gotten the power he had displayed. The beam attack, especially, was a mystery: unlike most SeeDs, Eric had never developed a special attack. Neither had Aiko, come to think of it. Quistis knew from the amount of time that it had taken her to master Blue Magic that you just did not learn a special attack overnight. She would ask Eric later, if she got the chance.

Fullar stormed into the interrogation room, trying his best to look indignant. He slammed a fist down on the table beside of Aiko and shouted "What the hell happened out there?!"

"We met the enemy and she kicked our asses," Aiko remarked.

Fullar turned a deep shade of red. "Do you have any idea the amount of property damage that you caused, the injuries?! If I had known what would happen, I would have sent the army with you!"

"They would have been worse than useless," Eric said. "Our enemy possesses more power than anything short of a sorceress-perhaps more. Her powers aren't like any SeeD has ever faced before. Your RMP or the military would have been slaughtered."

"Be that as it may, you engaged that power in a heavily populated neighborhoodâ€¦"

Quistis cut Fullar off. "She killed her family and anyone else in her home, Commander. She would have killed me and the others if we hadn't fought back. Our responses were designed to do minimal damage to the surroundings and to limit if not eliminate the number of casualties. Your men who died-she killed them."

"Who is this monster? Who are you fighting, Miss Treppe?" Since Quistis hadn't introduced herself, she was taken aback by this. "When I reported this incident to Balamb, the Combat Master indicated that his Head Instructor was among the combatants. Why is a teacher in the field?"

"It's none of your damned business."

Quistis was stunned beyond belief to hear Eric say that. Aiko, yes-it was in keeping with her sarcastic way-but not Eric. Fullar's head snapped, as if on a swivel, towards Eric. "Your concern is our activity here in Dollet, not the reasons behind our assignment of personnel," Eric continued. "In fact, the manner in which you have treated us is reprehensible. We are SeeDs, not common criminals. We risked ourselves to defend the citizens of Dollet from this threat, and we are not to blame for this incident." Eric gave him a moment to digest this, then went on. "Furthermore, while we are not on contract status, the behavior of the RMP in this manner could very well cause Garden to re-evaluate Dollet's account standing. In fact, there is a high probability that Garden might very well classify Dollet as a bad risk for accepting contracts from. And given the current civil unrest in Galbadia, I dare say that would be foolish."

Fullar looked as if he had been kicked repeatedly in the groin. He probably thought he was dealing with children, Quistis thought. "You-you can understand my concerns, can't you?" he whined. "We weren't expecting so violent a battle in the middle of Dollet, and I did lose men."

Quistis decided to play the peacemaker. "Commander Fullar, we understand perfectly. In fact, you can be of great help to us. The enemy- her name, by the way, is Aileen Navarre-did commit multiple homicides within Dollet. The RMP has jurisdiction over those murders. Any forensic evidence that you can find on the site could help us understand what we are fighting."

"Agreed. But from now on, you will not pursue this Navarre entity without the RMP. I will have to insist on that." Fullar let out a deep breath. "I will have someone drive you to where you'll be staying. There will, of course, be an RMP presence there."

"Oh, glory," Aiko muttered under her breath.

If Fullar heard her, he gave no sign of it. "Tomorrow, we will begin a coordinated effort to locate and destroy this enemy. You will, of course, cooperate fully."

Quistis pretended not to hear Aiko, even if she did agree with her. "We will do as you say, Commander Fullar. However, I can not promise you that we can protect your men."

"My men are capable, Miss Treppe. Now, who is Aileen Navarre? Why are you fighting her?"

Quistis thought about it for a moment. "She used to be a SeeD. We aren't certain where she got her power from, and we are still figuring out her motives. That is all we know." Quistis stood. "I would like to contact Balamb myself, Commander. Can you have your driver take us to our lodgings?"

Fullar looked as if he wanted to tell her no, but Quistis did not exactly look like she was going to take no for an answer. As was becoming customary for him in this business, he surrendered. "Very well. I only request that you make yourself available at any time should your enemy attack again."

Quistis doubted that Aileen would attack in such a fashion that the RMP would notice it. She felt rather tired, and she wanted nothing more than to rest, before the end of their struggle. She locked eyes with Eric, who had apparently already been watching her, and in his gaze she saw that he was not about to let her rest that easily. He had a great many questions to ask her, she sensed. Which made them even. She also saw concern in his eyes, and that brought confusion welling up in her. She was tired of most of the confusion that had her life had filled with since the night of the inauguration party-mostly. The last she thought she could deal with.

Squall was going through the roof in a way that Rinoa had never quite seen before.

Ever since the Dollet Royal Military Police had contacted Balamb Garden, telling him of a pitched, brutal battle involving Quistis and her little band, he had alternately raged at Quistis, for managing to back him into a corner and let her go in the first place, at the RMP for questioning the authority of SeeD, and at Headmaster Cid, who remained out of contact in Esthar. Rinoa knew that the fields that protected Esthar from sight made communications with the SeeD contingent there difficult, and she knew that Squall did too. His frustrations were getting the better of him. He punched the desk in front of him, hard enough to shake it, and said, "I should have gone with her, Rinoa. Should have tied her up and let this monster come here and fight all of us."

"Well, maybe you should have, honey. C'mon, Squall, you trusted your friend-our friend-to do what's right. Don't second guess yourself." She tried a smile and it failed miserably. "Uh-oh, complete relapse. You're back to your old gloomy self."

Squall ignored the joke. Rinoa was not exactly overwhelmed by shock. "One of my closest friends is fighting a monster that wants her dead for some reason from Quistis' past and I don't know what it is, Rinoa. And I let her go like an idiot!"

Rinoa thought about it for a moment. "You know, I know all of you guys pretty well, some more than others-but Quistis is a bit of a blank. She really doesn't talk about herself to me. I used to think that she was, you know, jealous of me. I hear all the rumors about her and you, y'know. What do you really know about her?"

Squall was about to tell her a dozen stories about Quistis, each of them designed to tell Rinoa a great deal about Quistis, when it occurred to him that all of them were from the point in time where she had become his instructor. She had to be a SeeD while I was at Balamb Garden, he thought; she was a SeeD for two years before she

got her Instructor's license. Why don't I know anything about her career as a SeeD? Why didn't Quistis ever tell me about it? "You have a point, Rinoa. She doesn't talk much about herself. And I thought I knew her." Squall leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Rinoa, I have to do something that you might not like." He touched a button on the intercom system on his desk, the one that allowed him to contact anyone in Balamb Garden. "Communications. Get me Kai Hallen."

Kai hated having a reputation.

Now, if that reputation had been for being a lover of beautiful girls, Kai would be willing to rescind that opinion. Being that his reputation was for being a hacker, a top flight datajack as the wired underground of Balamb liked to say, however, made his life sometimes problematic. If there was any computer crime at Garden, Kai was always on the short list of suspects. It was that reputation that had to have drawn Squall Leonhart's attention to him when Quistis had submitted the squad list after the briefing the day before. Squall had summoned him to the Combat Master's office - which had given him a chance to stare unabashedly at Rinoa as she had left the room-and had told him that he was unable to gain access to certain sensitive records that pertained to their mission. It certainly was not beyond the ability of a datajack like Kai to bypass a lock that granted only the Headmaster and the Garden Masters access to the files. Kai was certainly capable of doing that—the question was, would he without telling Quistis?

The answer to that had been, reluctantly, of course.

Kai liked Quistis, not to the extent that the Trepies did, of course, yet enough to get by. He liked her intelligence and she was very easy on the eyes, naturally. All of this was part of the reason why he had hesitated when Squall had given him his assignment; he was not the sort of person that stabbed his friends in the back. Lying to Eric and Aiko, who were far closer to him than he was to Quistis, was a part of it as well. That had contributed to the guilt he had felt as he had hacked his way into the databases of Balamb Garden as Quistis and the others had driven to the Navarre residence—he had felt guilt, yes. Not enough to stop him. Primarily because he was the best datajack at Balamb Garden, and the challenge of cracking Master-level encryption appealed to him. He had other reasons, true, but fundamentally, it boiled down to the challenge. Accessing the files had been child's play; the difficulty was decryption. The files were in a rather complex code, none that Kai recognized immediately. Kai had set a codebreaker program loose on the files and had turned to monitoring the battle with Aileen Navarre. Afterwards, he had listened in on both Fullar's communication with Balamb Garden, and, through the earbeads, his failed attempt to intimidate Quistis, Aiko, and Eric. He had been amused by Fullar's antics, knowing as he listened in that the hammer was about to fall on him.

As Quistis and the others had been taken to the Dollet Inn, the hammer had hit him between the eyes.

Squall contacted him, voice only, as he has looking through a few other pertinent files that weren't under Master-level encryption, and judging by the sound of his voice, the Combat Master was none too happy with him. "Hallen! What the hell is taking so long?" Kai imagined that Rinoa was with him, most likely rubbing his shoulders

and telling him to calm down. (In actuality, she was sitting on the other side of the room, staring at him in puzzlement.) "I need to know what happened when Aileen Navarre died ASAP. I needed that last night."

"I'm aware of that, sir. And I have the files in hand. However, without the encryption key, it's going to take a little longer to translate them."

"How much longer?" There was more than an edge of frustration to Squall's voice.

"Depends. This is a serious code-my programs usually can crack most stuff quick." Kai checked the monitor of one of the consoles; a sprawl of information scrolled up the screen. To most anybody, the data was meaningless. To Kai, the screen told him a great deal about the behavior of his program. "Maybe another hour."

"Hallen, listen to me. We have to discover if there's a reason that Navarre wants Quistis dead. Time is running out. Do what you can to crack those files, fast."

"Yes, sir." What the hell do you think that I'm doing, he almost shouted, dancing a jig? He barely acknowledged Squall as he signed off, returning to the files that he had accessed to along with the coded files, losing himself in thought. For some reason, he believed that the key was not in the files that Squall was interested in, but rather in the patient records of Casey Wellon. He just wished that he could put his finger on what was bothering him—other than guilt.

The Dollet Inn, for it's modest name, was a full sized hotel that rivaled the one in Deling City, a bit more rustic in décor yet still plush enough for the wealthy to feel comfortable. The RMP had given Quistis, Eric, and Aiko three single rooms on the fifth floor, with RMP officers standing guard at the elevator and the fire stairs. All three rooms were identical in size and furnishings, and for some reason, Quistis could not help but think that she was back in the dorms at Garden, in the paralyzing boredom of the institutional, the world of designed comfort. She was not normally this introspective—she could brood over her own faults, true, but not the world's—and she chalked it up to the stress of the moment. She stood by the window, arms crossed, working her way through the violent events of the past forty-eight hours, trying to make sense of it all.

A knock came on her door, and Quistis called "Come in," without asking who it was. She was not all that shocked when it was Eric; he had become almost a constant since the night of the inauguration party—lord, was that only two nights ago? she wondered. She addressed his reflection in the window. "What do you need, Eric?" she asked him.

"To clear something up so we can get to the bottom of a few things," he told her. "You-well, I'm sure you noticed that I have been hiding a great deal of my power."

"I did. You've been using something like twenty percent of the power you showed in the battle. Where does it come from?"

Eric walked closer to her, looking down at his booted feet. She could tell that he was having difficulty talking about this subject. "It comes partly from Grieving Angel and partly from me. My father trained me with the sword before he died. He showed me how to access its power and use it to amplify mine."

"Why didn't you tell anyone about it?"

"I have my reasons," he replied. "I-I don't really think of it as being my power, Quistis. I don't like to rely on it. And my father told me before he died to hide it while I was being trained as a Seed. He never explained why."

"Oh. Eric, is your mother still alive?"

He stepped over to the window beside of her and looked out. Across the city, the sun was setting in a glorious orange fireball. "I suppose so. She was alive when I left with Aiko for Galbadia Garden. I haven't heard from her in five years. So I really don't know-I feel she is, though."

"I hope she is, Eric. So many of us are orphans." She turned to face him. "You want to know how Aileen died, don't you?"

Eric nodded. "I don't want you to tell me, Quistis. I can see how much all of this hurts you. I have to know, though, if we're going to win."

"I know. And I wish I could tell you. But I don't remember, Eric, not completely. I see me and Aileen on a mission, under attack, I think we got ambushed. There's someone in danger- I hear someone telling me to help somebody-and I know Aileen died, shot twice. And that's all, Eric. Except..." She scowled, thinking about the voices that weren't part of the battle. Something about them danced at the edge of memory, then was gone. "No. It's gone now." She clenched her fists, frustration rising in her voice. "Why can't I remember? I need to remember, Eric."

"It's all right, Quistis. Don't push yourself."

"I have to, Eric!" She whirled on him, fear and confusion warring on her beautiful face. "She's going to kill all of us and I don't know why, Eric. She hates me and all I remember is our friendship. I'm afraid I'm losing my mind and I'm afraid I'm going to lose, period." She resisted the urge to cry; she had cried enough for a lifetime last night. "I'm afraid that she'll kill you and Aiko and it'll be my fault," she whispered.

Eric was not certain what to do. He was a fighter, a soldier, a lifetime of training going into turning him into a finely honed machine, reflexes wired for battle. He was not built for empathy, for sympathy for that matter, and the few friendships he had forged had been created largely by the other person. He was out of his arena trying to help someone in an emotional crisis. And yet he wanted to help Quistis, wanted to protect her in fact, whether or not she wanted or needed his protection. He lifted a hand to put it on her shoulder and she stepped into the circle of his arms. For some reason, he heard Aiko say, wryly, sarcastically "Well, hotshot, that didn't go as planned." He put his arms around her waist and told her "It will be all right, Quistis. I promise."

She smiled. "That's about what you should say, isn't it? How do you mean to keep your promise?"

"Haven't a clue, actually. I was raised not to quit, though."

"I had noticed that." She let her head fall against his chest, part of her still mystified at how he made her feel. What is happening to me? she wondered. "Uh, sorry if I presumed here. Guess I needed a hug."

"So far this has been the only duty as a Seed I've enjoyed." He decided to let this go wherever it wished, and see how it ended. He had his suspicions, however. Quistis chuckled at what he had said. "Whatever happens here, Quistis, you don't have to worry about me and Aiko. We'll do just fine."

She stared up into his eyes, a very short distance given their relative heights. "I know, Eric. I know." Silence fell over them as the inevitable began to assert itself. Eric raised his right hand to her face and she let him, her heart pounding as if she'd been touched by an adult, not this boy scarcely grown to manhood. Eric bent his head, clearly meaning to kiss her, and that was when she surprised herself by stepping back. "No. No. That's a bit sudden, Eric. For both of us." Eric blinked, as if he had been on auto-pilot. "I mean, I'm attracted to you for some reason-that sounds really bad, I know-it's just that we're going through a rough situation here. I don't think either one of us needs this."

Eric was not sure that he agreed. However, the attraction that had risen between them from seemingly nowhere was dubious enough that following it to a conclusion could be a mistake. He took a step away from her and said, "I know. Well, maybe we need it, but not now."

She nodded agreement. "Eric, I'll try to remember what happened, okay? I know it's important, that we know why she hates me." Eric decided to leave before he did something silly, like try to convince her of the error of her ways as far as the kiss had been concerned. Once in the hallway, for the first time in his life, Eric Alfredsson actually blushed.

Aileen Navarre, at the base of the communications tower, waited for Urizen to come to punish her.

That her lord and master would was inevitable-she had failed him once again-and she was ready for it. She had to have a chance to kill Quistis and that pretty boy, not to mention the bimbo that had aided them, and she would accept any punishment to be granted one last chance. Something was nagging at her, though, and it was not her failure. Rather, it was the fact that Quistis did not remember the fact that she had wronged her. It was not enough to kill Quistis for her crimes if she did not recall them, after all; her shame would be complete when she understood the depth of her crime. "I'll just have to educate her first. It's only fair, after all."

She had no warning, no sense that Urizen had arrived; his cold, taloned hand came from behind, wrapping around her throat, and lifted her from the ground. She did not need to breathe anymore, yet the sensation was exactly like strangulation. "YOU HAVE FAILED ME AGAIN,

AILEEN!" Urizen's voice boomed.

"My-my lord Urizen, I can explainâ€|" she choked.

"YOU CAN EXPLAIN FAILING ME, LITTLE MONSTER? IT WAS MY POWER THAT ALLOWED YOU TO ESCAPE THE VOID, MY POWER THAT GRANTED YOU THE RIGHT TO ATTEMPT YOUR VENGEANCE! TELL ME WHY I SHOULD NOT RETURN YOU TO THE VOID?"

"Becauseâ€|because she has to know why she dies. And she does not. You-you can return me to the void regardless of whether or not I defeat her this time. Just allow me the chance, dread lord."

Urizen's voice was silent, his cold force still hovering at her ear. Finally, after an eternity, he spoke, his voice a whisper more malicious than the thunder of his shouts. "That is an offer I cannot refuse, Aileen. Destroy her, then. Oh, and there is the matter of the swordsman. I find his weapon to beâ€|interesting. Kill him and bring his sword to me. Farewell." Urizen's force was gone, and she fell to the ground, her hand at her throat. She could care less about Urizen's last order; he had granted her the chance she had wanted. Now she would focus all her power on Quistis-once she knew the truth. Without a word, darkness enveloped her and she was gone.

Squall and Rinoa were still waiting for word to come from Kai in his office, Rinoa sitting in his lap, when Dr. Kadowaki entered, her face filled with concern. Rinoa got to her feet as Squall said "What's wrong, Doctor? Is it the Wellon girl?"

Kadowaki took the chair in front of Squall's desk. Her eyes, he saw, were filled with sadness, and worry. She wrung her hands nervously before she said " Squall, I should have told you this yesterday, and I let Quistis go because of so many reasons. You seeâ€|you seeâ€|I know what happened on that mission where Aileen died-and what it did to Quistis."

Kai was nearly asleep when the code breaker file completed its work and the computer announced, in a flat feminine tone "Files decrypted, Kai."

Kai sat up, rubbed his eyes, and went to the monitor. Listed at the top of the page was an index of the documents, which he scanned in passing, meaning just to dig in and start reading, when one filename caught his eye. "Psycho-hypnotic therapy reports on SeeD Level 13 Treppe, Quistis. Authorization by Garden Master Norg. " Kai clicked on the link provided, and the report appeared. He read just enough to be scared. "Oh my god. What did they do to her?"

Quistis sat on her bed, thinking about Eric in all honesty, when she felt eyes on her back, from the side of the room that had the window. She knew instinctively who it was. "Hello, Aileen. Are you here to kill me?"

Aileen shook her head, long hair flying. "Not yet, Quistis. Not until you remember. Do you want to know what you did to me?"

Quistis rose to her feet, picking up Save the Queen from where it lay on the bed. She turned and regarded Aileen, her best friend, the girl who had once known every secret that she had, and decided that it was

fair for her to reveal this secret to her. "I'm tired of the mystery, Aileen. I'm sick of not understanding why you hate me. If you know what happened, then by all means tell me."

Aileen extended a hand to her. "Then come with me, Quistis."

Quistis wished for a moment that she had let Eric kiss her, then she took Aileen's hand. "Let's go," she told Aileen.

To Be Continuedâ€¦

6. The End of the Innocence

> <meta name="Generator"> Part Five: The End Of the Innocence

Kindred Spirits Part Five: The End Of The Innocence

Aiko had been flirting with one of the RMP officers stationed at the fire stairs, less out of attraction than boredom, when Eric had left Quistis' room, looking a bit flustered. She broke off her conversation with the young officer, who cursed in frustration, and reached Eric before he got to his room. "What were you doing in there?" she asked him. Eric did not answer, opening the door and going into the room that was identical to hers and she assumed Quistis'. Aiko frowned and followed him without asking if she could come in. "Eric, what's wrong with you? You haven't acted like this since you met old what's-her-name at Galbadia Garden."

Eric sat down on his bed and sighed. "Her name was Kasumi, Aiko. And you're closer than you know. I was about an inch away from kissing Quistis a second ago."

"Man, do you work quick. Seriously?" Eric nodded. "You know, most guys would be going through the roof over that, unless she smacked you for it. You're the only man I know who makes being attracted to someone a miserable experience."

Eric picked up the sheath that held Grieving Angel from where it leaned against the bed and drew his father's sword. "You know there are reasons for that, Aiko," he told her. He held the sword up, studying the runes that run down the base of the blade. "There are times that I hate this thing."

Aiko sat down beside of Eric and patted him on the shoulder. "There , there, Eric. It'll be all right." She did not know that for certain, but it beat saying nothing. "Did you find out anything about how Aileen died? You said you were going to try."

"She doesn't really remember," Eric replied. "Something really odd is going on there." He put Grieving Angel away. "And I mean really. You know how earlier today that I told her my mother was dead, right? I know you heard that." Aiko nodded. "Well, just a few minutes ago, she asked me if my mother was still alive, and when I told her the truth, that I really don't know, she didn't bat an eyelash. She's having trouble making associations, Aiko. That's not good. I just wish I could help her."

"You have it bad for her, don't you?" She playfully messed with

Eric's hair. "I think that's sweet."

Before Eric could answer, Kai called on their earbeads. "Eric, Aiko, this is Kai. I know what's wrong with Quistis."

"How exactly do you know that?" Eric asked.

"Because Squall asked me to find out, and not to tell Quistis I was doing it. Believe me, I feel miserable about it."

"We'll kick your butt over it later, Kai," Aiko snapped. "What happened to Quistis?"

Kai cleared his throat. "It wasn't so much what happened to her as what was done to her. Quistis was a squad leader on a mission contracted by the Galbadian government. Elements of the Galbadian Army had decided to attempt to overthrow President Deling. The Galbadian secret service found out about it and hired SeeD to deal with it. The rebel army members were holed up in a slum neighborhood in Deling City, and they knew SeeD was coming. Quistis and the rest walked into a trap. Fifty-five percent losses, KIA. Including Aileen Navarre."

"So what happened to make Quistis a target of Aileen?" Eric wondered.

"I don't know. But I know why she can't remember it properly. It was done to her."

Without a sense of transition, Quistis was standing elsewhere.

She looked around, bewildered by being in the darkness, and saw rising above her a familiar shape, the communications tower that overlooked Dollet. Her hand dropped to her hip, finding the comfort of her chain whip. Aileen stood beside of her, looking for a moment like the girl she had known as a cadet. "I used to sneak up here a lot as a kid," she told Quistis. "It was inactive then, the only thing going on up here was older kids used it as a make-out point. I smoked my first cigarette on a dare up here."

Quistis stepped away from Aileen. "I'm not here to talk about your life, Aileen. I'm here to finish this."

"So you are. You're in a hurry to die then." Aileen began pacing back and forth. "Very well. Do you remember the mission that I died during, what it was exactly?"

Quistis concentrated, the very effort making her skull throb. "I-I don't know. I remember that we were fighting in a city."

"Deling City. One of the less reputable neighborhoods. SeeD was hired to deal with a renegade Galbadian Army colonel, who intended to use his unit to overthrow the President and put himself on top. We were brought in to keep the hands of the Galbadians clean, so when the colonel was defeated, he wouldn't be a martyr to the resistance forces. They could rightfully say that SeeD had killed the evil rebel."

"I remember that now." A flood of memories rushed over her: the briefing by Cid on the specifics of their contact, being ferried to

Galbadia via borrowed Galbadian air transport, how she had been given squad command of the first unit to enter the slum. She remembered the mixture of pride at being given command and the fear of going into combat. "I remember that."

"I'm so pleased," Aileen sneered. "Do you remember what happened when we went into the slums?"

Quistis strained, agony flaring in her mind. "I know we were attacked, that we were pinned down, but that's all."

Aileen shook her head. "This won't do. That was rather clever of them, using the GF to reinforce the therapy. I don't have time for this." She raised her hand, and electrical arcs crackled between her fingers. "I can subvert the blocks in your mind, Quistis. It's going to hurt a great deal, though." Electricity raced towards Quistis, and she was lost in pain, her body shaking from the voltage that Aileen poured into her. "Really, it's just a question of altering the electrochemical balance in your brain. That's all." Wracked with pain, now on her hands and knees, Quistis began to remember everything.

"You know what happened to Quistis?" Squall asked, incredulous. Dr. Kadowaki nodded, somberly. "You knew and you didn't say anything yesterday when I let her talk me into going after Aileen Navarre." She nodded again. "Why did you let me do it, Doctor?"

Kadowaki was silent for a long time, so long that Squall nearly prompted her to speak. Finally, she said, "I never expected any ill to come of it. Aileen was dead, and Quistis was in such pain over it. When I heard what you said yesterday, I was so shocked that I really did not know how to deal with it."

"Doctor," Squall said, gently, "what exactly are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I only wanted the best for Quistis. You see, after the mission that Aileen died on, Quistis was a wreck. She blamed herself for Aileen's death, was very depressed, and was suffering from post-combat stress. They were very close to discharging her for medical reasons—the Headmaster and the Garden Masters. I wanted to help the poor child—all she really did was go to that secret place behind the Training Center and think about Aileen—so I went to the Garden Master on her behalf."

"To Norg." Squall did not think much of the monstrous former Master of Balamb Garden, and he did not try to hide the scorn in his voice. "What did you do, Doctor?"

"I tried to convince him that Quistis had value as a SeeD, if her problems could be dealt with. Apparently I convinced him, because the Garden Masters took her off the combat roster and she went—somewhere—for a while. About a month later, she was returned to duty, the same person that she had been before, or so I thought. There was something odd about her. She would talk about Aileen, but it was as if she was reciting by rote. After a while, she stopped talking about Aileen at all. I thought it was just because she was dead, and after a while, young people move on. But now I'm not so sure."

"What could they have done to her?" Rinoa wondered.

"I don't know." Squall rubbed at the scar. "Playtime is over." He activated the intercom and hit the memory button that connected him to Selphie. She answered with a bubbly "Hiya!" Squall could usually count on Selphie to be cheerful. "This is Squall. How long can it take you to get the Ragnarok ready for departure?"

"Ah, gee, let's see—thirty minutes to re-fuel and pre-flight. What's up?"

"We're going to Dollet. We're going after Quistis."

"Should have done that in the first place, Squall. Meet you at the flight line!"

Squall next tried to reach Kai Hallen, but he either was off-line or wasn't answering. He asked the communications staff to try to reach Quistis directly using any SeeD combat frequency, but that did not work either. "Keep trying," Squall ordered, then he turned his attention to the doctor. "You only wanted the best for Quistis, Doctor. No one can fault you for that." There was no point in recriminations now, Squall thought; he had let Quistis leave. It was his task to put that to rights. "Come on, Rinoa, let's get ready. Quistis needs us."

"Whether she wants to admit it or not," Rinoa added.

This was what Quistis remembered:

She has only been a SeeD for a short time now, and yet she has learned very quickly that the intelligence that she gets before a mission can be very unreliable. On her first mission, the contractor's background data had been wildly inaccurate, overestimating the strength of the enemy by a factor of fifty percent. Quistis can live with that sort of error—it is the other sort, when her intel underestimates a foe, that lives are lost. She can understand, intellectually, why the Galbadians might understate the extent of the forces waiting for them in this slum—it would reveal the weakness of the government and the military if it got out that large units of the military plotted treason against President Deling. Understanding a thing and approving it are two different things, however, and as she leads her squad through a neighborhood turned sudden war zone, automatic weapons fire and mid-level magics blasting around them, she definitely does not approve of it. She dives into an alley, Aileen Navarre on her heels, bullets chasing them like living things. "This sucks!" Aileen decides, an opinion that Quistis shares. Quistis leans her back against the brick wall of the alley and cues her headset microphone and calls "Command, this is Squad leader Trepe. First squad pinned down by sniper fire and concentrated magic use! Request immediate support!"

No one answers as a series of Fire spells rake the street in front of them. Quistis somehow isn't surprised. "I think we're being jammed," she tells Aileen and the others. Among them is a blonde haired girl named Tamara, on her first mission as a SeeD. She is two years older than Quistis, yet she is looking towards the younger girl with fear and dread in her eyes. There are times that Quistis regrets being a child prodigy. This is one of them. "We're in trouble," she says largely to herself.

"No kidding," Aileen replies sarcastically. "Well, now what, fearless leader?"

Quistis peers around the corner, long enough to spot men armed with automatic weapons moving down the street towards them, using the cars parked in the street as cover. She ducks back around the corner as a sniper's bullet chips at the brick of the corner. "We can't stay here or we'll be overrun. Aileen, cast something, anything, towards that roofline over there. I'll take the men on the ground. Under cover of that, we'll retreat to the first alley we were in." The first alley offers little more protection than where they currently are, but it is closer to the SeeD force that they are the vanguard for. "You ready, Aileen?"

Aileen grins, part of her seeming to enjoy this. "As ready as you can get, Quistis."

Quistis rolls out into the street, casting a picture perfect Thunder spell. It hits a parked car square on and as she had hoped, the car explodes, driving the forces on the ground back. Simultaneously, Aileen casts a Fira spell, aiming for the roofline that appears to be where most of the gunfire is coming from. A series of small, secondary explosions, most likely from ammunition stores, go off. Quistis shouts "Move it!" and the first around the corner is Tamara, running pell-mell into the street, and for all of three seconds, Quistis allows herself to believe that they might escape unharmed.

Which is when Tamara flies forward, hands clutching desperately at the small of her back, the flat crack of a sniper's rifle echoing in the canyons of the slums streets.

Quistis lets out an utterly uncharacteristic yelp of fear as she rolls back into the safety of the alley. Tamara lays in the street, writhing in a pool of blood, her face pale. Oh my god now what, Quistis thinks. Aileen grabs her arm and shouts "Quistis! She's down! Do something!"

Quistis peers around the corner and sees that the men held at bay by her Thunder spell are regrouping, moving towards them again. She sees Tamara looking up at her, her eyes filled with pain and fear. Do something, she thinks. She decides that attacking beats dying. "Aileen! Clear us a path! Use a GF, quick!"

As Aileen begins to summon a GF, Quistis does the only thing she knows to do. She casts one of the few Shell spells that she has stocked on Tamara, protecting her from the sniper, and, gambling, she casts her gaze to the building Aileen attacked. With a burst of clarity, she sees the barrel of a rifle protruding from a window, and she reacts, using Laser Eye just as two shots roar from the rifle. The beam hits the windows, and a gout of blood explodes against the window. Quistis turns to call to Aileen, and that is when she sees her friend, who had stepped closer to the street to more accurately gauge where to dispatch the GF, slumped to the ground, two neat holes in her forehead, a halo of blood encircling her head-

"NO!" Quistis shouted, forcing the memory away.

Tears welled in her eyes as the shame, the guilt, the responsibility

that she had felt fell on her like a psychological ton of bricks. She remembered now, clearly, how she had been found by the second wave of SeedS that had broken through the rebel lines, clinging to Aileen, begging to someone, anyone to help her. She remembered it all, all the pain that a fifteen year old girl could feel when she lost something. She had lost her best friend and the innocence that her training had given her, that any situation could be overcome with the proper response. Intellectually, she knew that by killing the sniper, she had saved the squad with only minimal losses, in military terms. Military terms never translated well into terms of human lives. "My god," she whispered, "I didn't want you to die, Aileen. Do you blame me for dying in battle?"

Aileen kicked Quistis in the jaw, knocking her onto her back. "No, I don't. I'm not that petty. I blame you for casting that spell on Tamara! You could have cast something on me, but instead you left me unprotected! You went for the glory of killing the sniper!"

"I was trying to save all of us, Aileen." Quistis rose to her feet, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You don't know what happened to Tamara, did you, because you died? I remember now, thanks to whatever you just did to me. She was paralyzed below the waist, her spine shot in half. She died three weeks later from complications from her injuries. So I failed both of you."

"I don't care. It was because of you that I became this freakish thing I am now, this monster. Do you want to know how, Quistis?"

Quistis was about to answer, but her head filled with a rush of memory, as everything else that had been hidden in her mind revealed itself to her.

She is in the infirmary, sitting on a bed, hugging her legs to her chest, unable to stop crying. Aileen and Tamara both gone because of me, both dead because of me, is all she can think. She hears Dr. Kadowaki out in the office, talking to someone on the phone in a low whisper. It was the doctor who found her at the secret place, the one that she chose to go to to keep Aileen alive in her heart, the one who, just before going to talk to whomever she spoke to on the phone, had told her that she was going to make everything better. Quistis lays back on the bed and closes her eyes, wishing that it would all go away, and for a while it does as she falls into a dreamless sleep.

She is not certain how long that she sleeps, yet when she wakes up, she hears two people outside of her room speaking. One is Doctor Kadowaki, the other is an unknown, male voice. "I am the one who asked you for help," Kadowaki says, "because I know that the Masters have more power around here than most are aware of. I just have to ask, what you're proposing- is this really necessary?"

"Yes, Doctor. The girl has great potential, as you stated so eloquently to Master Norg. And there are psychotherapy techniques that can help her. The risk is great if she chooses to resist, but the rewards are considerable."

There is silence for a moment, then she hears Doctor Kadowaki sigh. "Then help her."

"What did who do to her?" Aiko asked Kai.

"Norg and the Garden Masters," he replied. "They really ran Balamb Garden until the War started. The Masters had amassed a great deal of study on the mechanics of GF and their effects on the human mind. Most of the data that they had came from Esthar. They used a technique that combined hypnotherapy with something called 'controlled electrochemical stimulus of Guardian Forces'."

"Which means?" Eric asked.

"It means, simply, that they used standard hypnotherapy to treat Quistis for the guilt she felt for living, which is all it really boiled down to. The problem was that Quistis, like most SeedS, is very strong-willed, so they feared that she could overcome most standard therapy. So they used a treatment that chemically controlled, in effect, the sections of the mind that the GF normally inhabits. Each usage of a GF would reinforce the treatment. But according to the notes I uncovered, it was never meant to erase or alter Quistis' memory. When the Masters realized what they had done, they simply kept quiet. Had Aileen never returned, Quistis might not have ever known what was done to her."

"So how did the blocks fail?" Eric wondered. "It's not like she's stopped using GF."

"There's something we're missing here," Kai said. "Something to do with the GF. Aiko couldn't summon a GF earlier, remember. And there's something else, right on the tip of my tongue, about GF."

"We'll figure it out later. Right now, let's go talk to Quistis. She doesn't deserve us talking behind her back about her problems." Eric stalked out of the room, Aiko one step behind him. He went over to the door to Quistis' room and knocked on it. "Quistis, this is Eric. We need to talk." No answer came, and, almost on instinct, he turned the doorknob, which opened. He entered the room cautiously and saw no one. The door to the bathroom was open, and he walked over there and peered in; no one was there.

Aiko stepped up to his elbow and grinned. "Hoping you'd catch her in the bathtub?"

Eric did not dignify that with a reply. "Kai, Quistis is gone. Try to raise her on the earbeads. I think Aileen outflanked us." He stormed across the room, fists clenched, wanting to hit something. "Damnit. Why didn't I stay here?"

Kai switched Eric out of the net for a second and said to Aiko "Man, he's really wound up over her. What's the big deal about Quistis?"

"He must like the way that long skirt hugs her hips," she muttered.

"So, you're remembering what Norg and his headhunters did to you?" Aileen asked. "How they altered your mind so you forgot what happened in Deling City. That actually was rather cleverâ€|they had two layers of programming. The first was designed to cause you to literally think about something else in the event that you dwelled on your, ah, issues. The second was designed to reinforce that therapy with

selective use of the GF. The more you activated the first level, the more the GF memory loss effects took hold. It excised the 'bad' memories from your mind. No wonder the Masters kept quiet."

"I never really forgot," Quistis replied, "I decided to become an Instructor to help train SeeDs that would survive what you and Tamara couldn't. I remember that now. But I was too lenient on my students, because, perhaps, I didn't want them to become SeeDs." And that was why she found herself, on two separate occasions, going to the place that reminded her of Aileen on the night of the last two-inauguration parties. "It was buried in my mind, Aileen, yet it was still there."

Aileen punched Quistis across the jaw, hard enough to send her flying into the heavy-alloy walls of the communications tower, some twenty feet away. "I'm touched, Quistis, truly. You vaguely remember me. Do you think that can make up for what happened to me after I died?"

Quistis activated her earbead and hoped that Aileen was in its range. The time for confessions was over; now she needed Eric and the others to hear what was going on. "Kai, this is Quistis," she subvocalized.

"Quistis! Oh, man, where are you?"

"The communications tower. Tie Eric and Aiko into this conversation; I want them to hear this." Aloud, she said to Aileen "You haven't explained how you came back, Aileen. I only think it's fair that you tell me what happened to you."

Aileen laughed. "It isn't important what you think is fair, Quistis. I will tell you, though, because it suits me."

"Eric! I found Quistis!"

It was fortunate that the earbeads were designed to minimize volume on their users, Eric knew, because it sure sounded as if Kai was shouting. "Where is she?" he asked, leaving Quistis' room at nearly a sprint. Aiko, who had collected her combat staff at Eric's behest, followed as he headed for the elevators.

"The Dollet Communications Tower. She wants you to listen in-I think she's with Aileen."

Eric had reached the elevator and the RMP officer that guarded it. "Where are you going, sir?" he asked.

Eric locked eyes on the officer, who had six inches and forty pounds on him, and said "Through you if you don't get out of my way." The officer studied the young swordsman and figured that there were better ways to collect his pension. He stepped aside and let them pass, waiting until Eric and Aiko had entered the elevator before he got on his radio and called Commander Fullar.

"Do you recall the last order you gave me, Quistis?" Aileen asked, almost coyly. "You told me to summon a GF. That was what I was doing when the bullets struck me-I was connected directly to the GF. Somehow, my mind, my very being, was transmitted along that connection to the sub-etheric plane that is home to the GF. I was

cast, bodiless, formless, into the void."

Eric and Aiko, hearing this, had reached the lobby when they heard Fullar shout "Halt! HALT!" Neither paid him much heed as he and four other RMP officers closed in on them from the other side of the lobby. They were on the sidewalk outside before Fullar and the officers caught them. "Where are you going?" Fullar snapped, trying to hide the fact that he was out of breath.

Eric turned and said, calmly, "The target has Instructor Treppe at the Communications Tower and we're going to get her. If you want to come, I don't care. But your mandate does not prevent us from going after her." And if it did, Aiko thought, you would go anyway.

Fullar turned to one of his men. "Get us two vehicles, now." He turned toward Eric and said, imperiously, "I'm not missing this battle."

Eric, amazingly, smiled. "I wouldn't dream of it, Commander."

"So there I was, alive and aware in the void," Aileen explained, "not even worthy of the notice of the GF that waited there to be summoned into the real world. And that was the worst part, Quistis, because the void isn't really meant to be experienced by human mind. There is no way to tell time, because time is not a function of the sub-ether. It has been years since I died for you, but those years felt like millennia. And so I waited into the void, until I met him. Lord Urizen."

In the front passenger seat of a car being driven by Allin Fullar at top speed through Dollet's narrow streets, Eric went pale.

"Lordâ€¦|Urizen?" Quistis asked.

"My lord and master. An entity of power that calls the sub-ether home. He found my bodiless form and realized that with some education, I could be a weapon. Once, of course, I swore my eternal loyalty to him. It was after that that I came to understand just what I was working for. Urizen trained me in the art of understanding the sub-ether, but imagine the amount of cruelty one can inflict on someone in a world that knows no time, where a second can last forever." She trembled in fear. "Lord Urizen is a terrible master-and it's your fault that I am his toy!"

Fullar drove the car across the bridge that led to the hills outside of Dollet, where the tower was. Eric and Aiko listened in private to Aileen's confessions.

An aura of power appeared around Aileen then, the ground shaking beneath her. "You let me die, Quistis, and put me in the void where a beast enslaved me!" Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I am the toy of a demon and it's because of you. YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!!!"

So that's it, Quistis thought. A one in a million freak occurrence and she somehow manages to survive death, but only at the cost of her sanity. I'm just a convenient victim. She took Save the Queen in her hands and readied for battle. Which was when things got, well, not odd-she had left odd behind two days ago-but definitely strange. A grey miasma surrounded Aileen, hints of leathery wings swirling

around her. And Quistis heard a voice that was not really a voice, more like a force that hammered words into her forebrain. "So, I am a demon, Aileen? Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Lord Urizen," Aileen sputtered in fear, "you said that I could kill her!"

"So I did. And you shall. However, I feel it necessary to remind you that you are to kill the swordsman and collect his blade-and he is coming. The time for playing is over, little toy. Use your fullest power on them and kill them." The miasma, the force, Quistis supposed, that was Urizen, disappeared like smoke on the breeze. "Eric," she whispered, "he wants you to kill Eric?"

"And take his sword. I am not certain why and I don't care."

Quistis frowned. "How do you take a physical object to something that lives in a void?"

Energy flared around Aileen's fists. "It doesn't matter, Quistis. Doesn't matter at all."

Half a mile away, Fullar driving through the twisting turns of the hillside road with a caution that bordered on the insane, Eric had had enough. He looked over his shoulder at Aiko and said, "Lord Urizen wants me. Can't disappoint him." He disappeared in a blur, reappearing an instant later outside the car before blurring up the hill. Fullar nearly wrecked the car in his surprise. "H-how did he do that? Can he teleport?"

"No," Aiko replied, "he's just really fast. You just couldn't see him." She looked up the hill and cursed whatever gods there were that Eric's father had been right.

Aileen hurled two blasts of energy at Quistis, which she hurdled, the power blasting a huge hole in the wall of the tower. She landed on her feet and cast a Flare spell at Aileen, a huge blast of elemental fire driving her backward into the rocky cliff that surrounded the tower. Quistis bounded toward Aileen, the chain whip screaming into her face, leaving a wicked welt. Aileen returned fire by hurling the blue spheres of power that she had first manifested at the fire cavern. Quistis dodged them, yet Aileen took advantage, appearing inches in front of Quistis. She thrust a hand out at Quistis and pure force hammered her backward. Quistis managed to find her feet and cast a Tornado spell that blew Aileen into the cliff side hard enough to cause a small landslide. Rocks covered her, and Quistis did not hesitate, casting Ultima. Maybe the combination of physical damage and Ultima will be enough, she thought. Quistis doubted it. Green fire ate at the hillside, and for a moment, Quistis dared to hope.

Then Aileen leaped free from the explosion and hurled a blast of power towards Quistis. Quistis avoided it by turning her head to the side, the bolt missing by inches. It soared past the tower and hit the ground behind it, a globular explosion lighting up the sky. Aileen landed in front of Quistis and said "Well, suddenly you're awfully calm. What happened?"

"She saw me."

Aileen looked over her shoulder and saw Eric standing at a low cut in the side of the cliff, his sword in his hand. "Did I hear that you wanted my sword?" he asked her.

"And how, pray tell, did you hear that?" Aileen asked.

Eric almost smiled. "That's none of your business."

Aileen howled in rage and fired a bolt of power at him. He blurred out of its way, an explosion roaring on the ridgeline. Eric reappeared yards away, and Aileen attacked him again, with the same result, only this time he appeared next to Quistis. "Hello," he said calmly. "We know what happened to you, Quistis, and what Norg had done to you. Kai found it out."

"That shouldn't surprise me. We'll talk about that later." She nodded towards Aileen. "Why does her master want Grieving Angel?"

"Haven't a clue," he lied. "We'll talk after she's defeated."

Aileen summoned the same sword and plate-armor that she had used to fight Eric earlier that day. Quistis wondered how she did that, if being part of the sub-ether allowed her that power. "Brave talk, little swordsman. You and her have used most every attack that you have and you haven't even hurt me yet. How will you beat me?"

"What makes you think we've used everything we have?" Quistis asked. "You don't have the slightest clue how many Blue Magics I could use, the spells I have drawn. And I have no clue how strong Eric is."

"Well, maybe that's true. But you have no idea of the kind of power that I have."

Squall and Rinoa came into the cockpit of the Ragnarok to find Selphie singing a song as she checked off items from her pre-flight checklist. All three of them had their best weapons-Rinoa wore Shooting Star on her wrist, he carried the gunblade Lion Heart, and Selphie's oversized nunchaku, Strange Vision, leaned against the back of the pilot's seat. Selphie waved at the other seats in the cockpit and said "Strap yourselves in, kids, we're nearly ready to go!"

Hang on, Quistis, he thought, we're coming.

Aileen rested her sword on her shoulder and gave both Quistis and Eric a withering gaze. "You see, my sub-etheric nature lets me see life as patterns of energy, and as such, I can read your power levels. You, Quistis, are maybe twenty times stronger than you were when I was alive. And you, pretty boy, you're good at hiding power, but I can tell you're hiding maybe twenty percent of your power. If I were you I would let it out. You see I hate to waste power-we Seeds are trained that way, right? -so I've only used enough power to be just stronger than you." She raised her right hand, showing her fingers to them. "Five percent, Quistis. That's all the power I've used so far. Five percent of my power."

Quistis felt a single drop of cold acid fear fall on her heart. "You can't be serious," she said. "You're only at five percent?" She looked over at Eric and asked, knowing that he would have an answer, "Is she telling the truth?" Eric took a tighter grip on Grieving

Angel and simply nodded. My god, Quistis thought. Only five percent. We can't possibly beat her.

Aileen assumed a combat stance, the same basic stance that SeeD combat instructors taught in the first combat courses. "Would you like to see my true power before you die, Quistis? Because this time, you will die. And I don't care if you die well or not, so long as you die."

To be concludedâ€¦|

7. Kindred Spirits

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Kindred Spirits Part Six: Kindred Spirits

The answer was right on the tip of Kai Hallen's tongue.

Buried somewhere in the reams of data that he had collected over the past twelve hours—the files on the mission in Deling City, the attached studies on GF that were appended to Quistis' psychological reports, even the medical data on Casey Wellon that he had hacked for his own education—was the answer to what Aileen was. Even as Aileen made her rather frightening pronouncement that she had merely been toying with them, and that her true power was twenty times greater, it nagged at Kai. Somewhere in here, he thought, looking at the computer, is the answer. The trick is to find it before she kills Quistis, Eric, and Aiko. He was absolutely terrified that he was overlooking the obvious, and it was going to cost someone their life. "Easy, Kai," he told himself, "think like that and someone will die." He rose to his feet and began to pace the length of the boat's control area, trying to find what he sought. It's the GF, he thought, all of this bears on the GF. But why? For the sake of the others, Kai knew that he had to find it out, and fast.

Aileen exploded towards Quistis and Eric, covering the distance between them in less time than it takes to tell. She kicked Quistis in the ribs hard, simultaneously slashing at Eric with a stroke that he parried, his arm going numb from the impact. Eric managed to return the stroke, but Grieving Angel only found air. Aileen was now behind Quistis, who was still falling backwards from the kick. She aimed a strike at Quistis' back that looked to break her spine, yet she—and Eric—had once again underestimated Quistis. She turned her backward motion into a neat head-over-heels roll, and Aileen's sword just missed. Quistis cracked Save the Queen at Aileen's right knee and managed to topple her. Aileen did not wait around; she bounded to her feet, landing on a catwalk on the side of the communications tower. She raised her right hand and unleashed a series of rapid fire pulses at them.

"Oh, damn," Quistis heard herself say as she dove to avoid the first barrage. The blasts hit the ground behind her and exploded with the force of a hundred piledrivers, throwing her forward. She wasn't certain where Eric was, but she hoped he would join in if he was able. She hit the ground and, hoping that Aileen wasn't immune to status spells, cast Blind towards her.

Aileen staggered backward, a second group of pulses that were aimed

their way now blasting the edge of the cliff opposite of her. Eric accelerated toward her from out of nowhere, Grieving Angel raised over his head. Aileen somehow managed to raise her sword, yet Grieving Angel smashed through it, shattering whatever it was composed of, and buried itself in her shoulder. Eric withdrew the blade and gave her a backhanded blow that knocked her to the ground below.

Quistis closed on her, hoping to end it, which was when Aileen turned toward her, lying on her back, and caught her with a blast of power. Her Shell held-barely-yet the force of the blow sent her flying back at the tower. Eric appeared, again from nowhere, and caught her in his arms. Aileen, now back to her feet, sent a bolt of energy their way that made the very air boil. Eric, still holding Quistis, leaped away, but shrapnel from the resulting explosion tore into his back. He dropped Quistis and spun towards on Aileen, Grieving Angel flying from its sheath like silver lightning, just in time to meet another energy bolt. He managed to deflect it, sending it soaring into the hills where it detonated with a force that shook the area. "She's not kidding," Eric panted, out of breath from his exertions.

"I noticed," Quistis said. Seeing blood through the tears in his jacket, she told him "You're hurt."

"Tell me about it later."

She cast a Curaga spell on him as Aileen stopped her attack and wagged a finger at Eric. "You know, that sword of yours is making things problematic. It's well equipped for defending my attacks."

"Sorry for the inconvenience," Eric called.

Aileen smiled. "I'm sure you aren't, swordsman. However, you are making it hard for me to kill Quistis, and as you just demonstrated, I'm not up to your skills with a blade. So I think I'll find you a playmate. After all, it's just her I want to kill myself. So long as Lord Urizen receives your blade, the manner of your death is unimportant."

"I'm sure that hurt your feelings," Quistis quipped.

"I was hoping for the up close and personal death."

Aileen raised her arms to full extension from her shoulders, her eyes glowing red with malice and power. A red-orange aura filled the air around her, the ground cracking, and small rocks began floating into the air. "This is an aspect of my power that you have yet to face, kids. You're gonna love this." A shape appeared beside her, surrounded by her aura, indistinct, possibly humanoid judging by the silhouette. Aileen focused her power, eyes closed now, as the shape wavered for a moment, then began to come into focus. Eric and Quistis stood wary, wondering what was coming for them this time.

For her part, Aileen was strangely pleased. What she was trying to accomplish here was a talent that she wasn't certain she possessed; it was a talent that Urizen had told her was inherent to the Anointed, and some of the lesser Dominions, and he had often compared her to those. She focused her power on the sub-etheric plane, becoming a conduit, the opener of the way, and summoned the

Minion. It took form beside of her, an entity that stood some nine feet tall, hugely muscled, its grey skin covered with diamond shaped plates at the shoulders and over the elbows and knees. Its bald head was nearly featureless; the eyes narrow white slits, the mouth a line that was almost a sketch. In its hands it held a sword, similar to the one she had generated, only this blade was seven feet long from pommel to tip and weighed perhaps five hundred pounds. It took a step forward and roared, in as much rage as pain. Drawing the Unformed to this world is not pleasant for them, she thought. "Say hello to an, ah, associate of mine," she called to her foes. "He's a native of where you sent me, Quistis, and he obeys my every command." She snapped her fingers and pointed at Eric. "Minion, make him dead. And bring back his sword, for Lord Urizen." It raised its monstrous sword and howled wordlessly, then it lifted one hand and a wide beam of power raced towards them. The explosion drove Eric away from Quistis, forcing him away from Aileen, towards the cliff that led to the road back to Dollet. Quistis rolled to avoid the fire of the explosion, unable to see Eric, feeling the wind of the monster's passage as it attacked. She called Eric's name and wasn't shocked when Aileen appeared in front of her. "Oh, Quisty, when you call a guy's name you need to make it more breathy. He'd love it if you did it in his ear. Of course, you'll be dead before you can."

Quistis hauled off and punched Aileen squarely in the nose, as hard as she could. She would have liked to have been rewarded by some sort of sign of injury, blood or something, yet Aileen just took it. She merely slapped Quistis across the face, a blow that hurt more than any Aileen had delivered yet. Quistis fell back, barely conscious, yet she still managed to cast a Quake spell at point-blank range. Maybe this will slow her down, she hoped. The ground rose up in a tumult beneath Aileen's feet, waves of force hammering into her. Quistis landed on her feet just outside of the zone of influence of the Quake spell, which caused Aileen to fall to her knees. She looked up at Quistis and grinned, amazingly enough. "You have drawn a lot of magic, haven't you? A pity it won't save you."

"Well, a girl can dream, can't she?" Quistis asked. She cracked Save the Queen against the ground threateningly. "You still want to fight me, Aileen?"

"Naturally," Aileen replied, rising to her feet, energy glowing around her fists. "Were you hoping I'd say otherwise?"

"Like I said, I can dream."

Aiko had clambered into the front seat of the RMP car, "accidentally" catching Fullar in the ribs with an elbow (the better to voice her displeasure with him) once Eric had left. Fullar was watching as explosions rose into the sky around the tower, at a loss for words. He looked at her and managed to say "What are you all fighting, Miss Hayashibara? What is going on here?"

"About your typical Saturday night for SeeD," she replied. She was enjoying the increasing realization that was coming to Fullar, that maybe, just maybe, there were things that the RMP should stay out of. Mostly, though, she worried about Eric and Quistis as well. "Can't you drive any faster?" she complained. Worried about Quistis, she thought, now that's a new one. My rep would be shot if anyone heard about this.

Fullar rather suddenly jammed on the brakes and shouted, "Get out!" at Aiko. She looked out the windshield and saw two glowing blurs racing down the road at them. She grabbed her combat staff and managed to get clear of the car an instant before the two forms blasted past, the force of their passage knocking the car end for end. Aiko leaped back to her feet and spun to watch the two combatants-and her keen vision could discern that whomever it was that had gone by, they were fighting-as they fought their way up the side of the hills, out of sight. "Damn," she said, awed. She had a pretty good idea who one of the fighters was, and she wished Eric well. Before she could make an attempt to follow, a new series of explosions rang out from below. She and Fullar had reached the cliffs above the entrance to the tower, she saw as she ran forward, and saw Quistis, doing her best to avoid another fusillade of energy attacks from Aileen. Fullar came up beside her and cried, "What is going on here?"

Aiko sighed and cast a Sleep spell on Fullar, who fell over to the ground. With any luck, she thought, the other RMP goofs with him will worry over him so much that they'll stay out of the way. She gripped her staff tighter and, cursing a blue streak, jumped over the edge of the cliff, unwittingly following a trail that Selphie Tilmitt had blazed during her field exam in Dollet.

Aileen had managed to catch Quistis off guard and now held her by the throat, one handed, cutting off her air. "You know, this is not a dignified way to die, Quistis," she said, condescendingly.

"Sorry I'm not-dying well enough for you," Quistis gasped. She concentrated and cast a Firaga spell at Aileen, taking some of the brunt herself. Aileen fell back, clutching at her face in as much surprise as anything else. Quistis lay on the ground, trying to catch her wind, as Aileen shouted incoherently. "Why won't you die?" she asked Quistis rhetorically. She raised her power again, meaning this time to incinerate Quistis.

Which was when Aiko appeared, scoring with a beautiful flying kick to the face that had all her strength behind it.

Aileen, caught off guard by the attack, flew the distance between Quistis and the tower in a heartbeat. She smashed into an area already damaged in the battle, wreckage falling on top of her. "YES!" Aiko shouted, "I am the girl!"

Quistis got to her feet, breathing heavily. She could discern Aileen within the twisted metal, flames from the explosions that the battle had caused licking at her. Somehow Quistis doubted it was over, but it was a breather. "Thanks," she said to Aiko.

"Don't mention it, unless you can get me bumped up to SeeD level seven and get me a pay raise. Where's Eric?"

For answer, a series of globular explosions rang out over a half-mile distance in the hills around them. "He's fighting something Aileen summoned, some kind of monster. Just how strong is Eric?"

"Strange time to ask that, the middle of a fight."

"I might not survive this fight, Aiko."

Aiko was forced to acknowledge that Quistis had a point. However, she had no good answer for Quistis. "I don't know how strong he is, hon. Just hope it's strong enough."

Aileen had finally made a mistake, Eric thought as he avoided the shots that the Minion was hurling his way.

The monster seemed perplexed that he was avoiding or deflecting all of the attacks that it threw at him, which was not all that surprising; as a SeeD, Eric had only seen a few people move at the speed that he was currently moving-Squall and Seifer were among them-and never over this kind of distance. Squall and Seifer were capable of it, but their training lacked. Eric swung Grieving Angel at a ball of energy, sending it soaring into the sky, and then he closed on the Minion, his sword glowing with force. The Minion met his attack with a thundering parry that shook the ground, then both of them went at it blade to blade, moving so fast that few alive could see them. Eric planted a kick into the Minion's side, but paid for it as the creature opened a palm and fired a ball of energy at him. Eric got Grieving Angel up, the kinetic energy of the attack driving him backwards. The ball threatened to beat his defenses, but with a shout he managed to hurl the attack back at the Minion. The Minion speeded up, avoiding the attack, and reappeared behind Eric, it's huge weapon raised for a killing blow.

Eric blocked the attack blindly, Grieving Angel going over his left shoulder and catching the blade of the Minion's sword with his. He whirled and struck at the Minion with a blow that caused it to stagger backward, giving Eric a moment to go for the kill. He focused the power that was his/Grieving Angel's, blue-white fire rising from the blade, and he swung the sword in the direction of the Minion. A wave of power rushed towards the Minion, enveloping it in a cocoon of lethal force. It swept past the Minion, uprooting trees and hurling rock and topsoil into the sky before detonating. Eric covered his eyes with one hand, the shock wave of the explosion pounding him. You messed up, Aileen, he thought. I was born to kill things like this.

The smoke cleared, and Eric was a bit surprised to see the Minion, battered and bruised yet still standing. Held too much back, he decided as the Minion moved to attack again. Am I scared of my power?

As Quistis and Aiko watched, Aileen forced the metal that imprisoned her away with a wave of her arms and leaped free. She wore only a few scraps of the blue dress, burns covering most of her body. She glared at them and as she did, her flesh repaired itself, and new clothing-a male SeeD uniform-wrapped itself around her. "She's regenerating herself," Quistis said in awe. "How can we beat her?"

Aileen raised her arms over her head and began to laugh. "That's just it, you can't, can you, Quisty?" Rapid fire beams of energy began raining from her palms, and both Quistis and Aiko retreated, their fear giving them the agility to climb the steep cliff behind them in a series of leaps that stretched yards at a time. They reached the top of the cliff and were hurled forward by a series of blasts. "You know, Quistis, I'm starting to really dislike your friend," Aiko called.

Aileen appeared at the top of the cliff, and Quistis let her have it,

casting Meteor at her. Just to be sarcastic, as the meteors began to strike around Aileen, Aiko cast a simple Blizzard spell at her. As Aileen defended Aiko's spell, the meteors that Quistis had summoned began to pound her. Aiko and Quistis retreated further down the hill, past the RMP officers that were trying to revive the sleeping Fullar. Feeling a bit of sympathy for him, Aiko cast Dispel on him as they passed. "I'd leave, gentlemen," Quistis shouted as the Meteor spell sent destruction falling on Aileen. She hoped that would do enough damage to slow Aileen down until Eric returned—for one thing, Quistis was down to her last two major attacks, and neither was one she really wanted to use. And for another, if he came back, that would be because he had survived.

Aileen did not wait for the Meteor spell to finish before she rushed them, scattering Fullar and his officers like tenpins and heading at them. "Oh hell," Aiko said, raising her staff, "she's coming to kick our asses."

Aileen went for Aiko, throwing a wild haymaker punch that Aiko blocked with her staff, the impact sending shivers up her arms. Aiko tried to remember everything that Quistis and others had taught her about the tactics of two people fighting one, and made sure Quistis had avenues of attack as she stepped up to Aiko, striking with her staff. Aileen blocked blows that, backed by her junctions, could shatter stone, with her forearms. Quistis joined in, approaching Aileen at an angle, Save the Queen slicing the air. Aileen avoided the attack, which was just a feint to allow Aiko the chance to attack. Her staff met Aileen's ribs as she moved to dodge Quistis, and the impact was frightening. Quistis added a shot from her chain whip that took Aileen from the opposite side from Aiko's attack. Aileen took a step back, staggering for a moment, and then she grinned at them. "Sorry. Just admiring your teamwork. It was so lovely," she sneered. "I'm through playing, Quisty."

She moved at full speed, already kneeing Aiko in the stomach when she could be seen again. Blood came from Aiko's mouth along with her breath; Aileen chopped at Aiko's back, driving her into the ground. Quistis tried to cry out Aiko's name, but Aileen appeared in front of her, elbowing her in the face. Quistis felt her nose shatter, and she nearly lost consciousness; Aileen kicked her across the jaw, putting her down. "Poor little Quistis," she mocked, "I've broken your pretty face. Your boyfriend will be very unhappy." She bent and lifted Quistis by one hand. "Isn't this where we always wind up, Quisty?" she wondered, clenching her fist, energy surrounding her hand.

Kai was of two minds as the battle raged.

On the one hand, he was terribly worried as he listened to his friends as they battled helplessly against Aileen, actually hearing the explosions through the hull of the boat. On the other, though, he was lost in thought, scanning the data he had gathered with a mechanical precision, trying to find the thread that bound all of it together. My friends will not die because of me, he thought.

When the comms board called for his attention, Kai answered it practically on remote control, merely mumbling "Hallen here," as an answer.

"Hallen, it's the Combat Master. We're en route, what's the situation?"

Oh, Kai thought, now you're coming. You let Quistis talk you into going after Aileen nearly alone and now you're coming to save her. Great. "It's bad, They're fighting the enemy right now and getting their butts kicked. What's your ETA?" As he waited for an answer, he paged through more data, and for once made a mistake, accidentally calling up the medical recording that he had gotten when Aiko had tried to summon a GF earlier. The computers always recorded the earbead data, so he had the entire summoning sequence, the gentle curve that marked the alignment part of the summoningâ€¦

â€¦And it all hit Kai then, avalanching into his mind with such force that he felt he was going to faint. "Oh my God," he thought, bending over his computer, "I know what Aileen is."

Eric and the Minion were battling blade to blade again, their battle uprooting trees and sending flashes of light leaping into the night sky. Neither fighter had gained an advantage over the other, which was not what Eric wanted. Quistis and Aiko need me. Eric sent a series of strikes at the Minion, who parried each, but Eric's intent had changed. He drove the Minion back towards the edge of a ridgeline, his attacks with a specific design. If my father was right, he thought, the Minion is designed for combat, almost mechanically. So with any luckâ€¦the Minion's feet reached the edge, and Eric thrust straight at its chest, driving it backwards. As he had hoped, the Minion stumbled and fell backwards down the side of the ridge. Eric sheathed Grieving Angel and, in a heartbeat, generated his beam attack. The beam hit the Minion square on and drove it into the ground, a gigantic globular explosion following the impact. Eric reached out with senses that his father had trained him in and did not sense the Minion. "Well, what do you know," he whispered, "it worked." Eric looked across the valley, seeing the light of energy blasts racing towards the bridge that led out of Dollet. "How did they get there?" he asked. Then it hit him, and he smiled. "Aiko, you really are getting into the spirit of things."

Aileen was ready to end Quistis' life when a familiar crack rang out and something embedded itself in her shoulder. She turned and nearly laughed when she saw Allin Fullar standing there, a smoking handgun of Galbadian manufacture in his hands. "Oh, dear, the RMP. Are you going to arrest me, dear officer?"

"If I would I could. But I'm not going to let you kill those girls, monster."

Aileen tossed Quistis over her shoulder and faced Fullar fully. "Silly man, I am immortal now. And you are just a man."

"Perhaps. But I have my duty."

"As do I." Aileen lifted a hand and built her power. "Say your prayers, little human." She fired a ball of energy at him; however, just before it hit Fullar, someone jumped at him, pushing him aside. She turned to see Aiko, standing next to where Quistis was regaining her feet, holding Fullar by his shoulders. "I thought I had finished you, you bimbo," Aileen snarled.

"Eric isn't the only one with secrets, or surprises," Aiko said. "And it takes a bimbo to know one." A greenish aura surrounded her and the

others, and Aiko grinned. "I hope that this worksâ€|Flash Teleport!"

The aura seemed to collapse into the air, Aiko, Quistis, and Fullar not so much disappearing as being pulled into where ever the aura had taken them. Aileen stared, stunned, at where they had been. "Wow, cool trick. Is everybody hiding their power from SeeD now?" She focused her senses on the disruption that Aiko had ripped in the fabric of reality and tracked it to the end-not too far away. "I'm coming, little bimbo. Don't you worry."

Aiko, Quistis and Fullar appeared at the end of the bridge that led back to Dollet, and at once Aiko swooned and nearly fell over. Quistis supported her and asked, quite logically, "What did you do?"

"My little secret. Flash Teleport. It's how I met Eric-his father was one of the people that trained me in it." Aiko stepped away from Quistis. "I never told anyone about it because it's dangerous to use."

"That may be, but hiding things like that isn't going to go over very well with Squall." How much are they hiding from us, and why, Quistis thought. "You and Eric have a lot of explaining to do."

"Kinda figures that you'd worry about protocol when I just saved our lives." Aiko pointed into the hills; a thunderbolt of red was racing towards them. "Well, I saved them for the moment." she admitted. "Here she comes again."

Quistis made a decision. "Aiko, Fullar, get going. I'm running out of tricks to use." She turned and began to run across the bridge, letting Aiko and Fullar go in front of her. As Aileen neared, using her power to levitate herself, she began raining bolts of power on them. "Get to the other side," Quistis yelled, not that they needed any encouragement. As she reached the halfway point of the bridge, she stopped to face Aileen. Her former friend landed on the bridge, arms crossed. "Well, that was clever of the little tramp," Aileen said. "I didn't think SeeD had a teleporter."

"Neither did I." Quistis closed her eyes and reached into her supply of magics, finding the one spell that she should not have, the one Squall had drawn from Ultimecia in the future and had given to a few SeeDs, among them Quistis. She only could cast this spell twice, and she hoped it would be enough. She cast the spell silently, and a haze, like that from gasoline, filled the air. Aileen felt the power building and, with the closest thing to fear that Quistis had heard in her voice yet, asked, "What are you doing?"

"My secret, Aileen." Quistis brought her hands in front of her and called the name of the spell that she hoped would bring this battle to an end. "Apocalypse!"

Incomprehensible forces hit Aileen then, rending the very fabric of reality itself. They had barely survived this spell in the future-it had been a near thing-and Quistis hoped that the fact that Aileen was not aware of it's existence would keep her from being able to mount a defense. Aileen screamed in agony, the spell fracturing her very being, until finally her power was unleashed in one monstrous blast. Quistis turned and ran, feeling under her feet the bridge shudder as

it began to collapse in both directions. The bridge fell into the river below in sections, Quistis on the last section as it began to fall. Not quite ready to die, Quistis jumped, Save the Queen whipping out and catching an outcropping of stone. She swung back into the side of the cliff with an impact that caused her to see stars, and she nearly lost her grip. The sound of the bridge falling was enormous, huge blocks of concrete smashing into the river below. Oh, man, am I going to get it now, she thought. We'll be in debt for decades paying that back. She felt the whip's hold on the outcropping slip, and she thought that it would be ironic to die on the heels of Aileen.

Aiko removed the irony from the situation by grabbing the whip with both hands and pulling. "You know, you could put those boots of yours to good use and help," she remarked sarcastically.

"Wise ass," Quistis replied with a bit of affection, using her feet to climb the riverbank.

"I understand it now," Kai said to Squall. "It's the thing that we constantly overlooked that is the key."

Aboard the Ragnarok, Squall rubbed at the scar on his forehead. "I'm lost, Hallen. So cut to the chase."

"Sorry, sir. We were so worried about the fact that Quistis was hiding something, or so we thought, that we forgot the other victim here. Casey Wellon."

"Yeah," Selphie cried, "poor little Casey. That Aileen girl attacked her first."

"I don't think that's the case at all, Miss Tilmitt," Kai interjected. "Squall, sir, did you ever find any sensor evidence to indicate how Aileen gained entry to Balamb Garden?"

"No, we never did. I was thinking that she used some kind of stealth tech, but obviously not."

"No, sir. Aileen told Quistis that when she was killed while summoning a GF, her consciousness found itself in the sub-etheric plane that most GF come from. Her behavior is similar to that of a GF; she has demonstrated the ability to manifest herself at any point and like Quistis said, she uses non-typed energy, similar to GF like Bahamut. Plus she has shown an ability to interfere with GF, first, by somehow, probably via the mind link she established with Quistis, causing the GF-supported hypnotherapy she'd gone under to fail."

"I guess it's good that Dr. Kadowaki confessed what had been done to her, or we would never had found it out," Squall said.

"You can fine me later, sir. Secondly, Aiko tried to summon a GF and was unable to in Aileen's presence. So she clearly operates on frequencies that are close to those of a GF, close enough that she can actively interfere with GF." Kai started to bring it home. "As you know, while there are naturally occurring GF, such as Cerberus and the Brothers, most GF live in the sub-ether. And once they're junctioned, even GF that begin in the real world are stored in the sub-ether and obey its laws. They have to be summoned to this plane through a specific electromagnetic alignment of the host

mind."

"Hallen, what are you driving at!" Squall bellowed.

"A GF has to be summoned! And Aileen behaves like a GF! SO WHO SUMMONS HER?"

Aiko pulled Quistis back up to her feet and, caught by an impulse that she couldn't understand, hugged the older woman. "What was that for?" Quistis asked.

"Oh, the fact that I don't have to explain to Eric how I let you die." She released her teacher. "Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Oh, no, it'll be all over the Garden as soon as I can get back to Balamb." She looked out over the destruction that her spell had wreaked. "Wow. I overdid it."

Fullar stepped up beside of them and whistled. "I am not authorized to deal with this kind of damage," he said in a business-like tone. Quistis and Aiko looked at each other and then began to laugh.

"Oh, girls," Aileen's voice said from nowhere, "let me in on the joke."

She stepped out of the thin air at the end of the bridge, again unscathed from the attack. Quistis considered her torn clothes, the cuts and scrapes that she had, Aiko's similar condition, and swore. What do we have to do to beat her? Quistis heard the sound of voices murmuring, and, risking a glance over her shoulder, saw that people were starting to fill the street, responding to the destruction of the bridge. "Commander Fullar, I would recommend that you get those people off the street. They're just targets for her." Fullar nodded and ran down the street, waving his arms and shouting warnings.

Aileen sneered. "There you go again, worrying about others. It's going to kill you."

"Just means nothing else will," Quistis replied.

Aileen lifted one hand above her head, her power surrounding her fingers. "Well, shall we go again? This is so boring-

A flash of silver blurred behind her, and she staggered forward, the blast she meant for Quistis going wild and shooting down into the river. Eric appeared in front of her, Grieving Angel impaling her through the breastbone. He withdrew the blade and flipped back to where Quistis and Aiko stood as Aileen fell to her knees. "Hi," he said modestly, "you've been using your hidden talents, haven't you, Aiko?"

"Well, I did it to save your lady's life," she chirped.

Eric blushed. "She's not my lady, Aiko. How are you doing, Quistis?"

"Been better. She's back up again." Eric assumed his normal stance as Aileen got up, the wound in her chest visibly closing. Stubborn girl,

Eric thought.

"You bastard," Aileen croaked, "what happened to the Minion?"

"I killed it. You needed to pick better help."

"Maybe." Aileen's aura rose again, white-hot this time. "And maybe it's time I used the full force of my power."

"Funny," Eric replied, "I was thinking the same thing."

Kai, infuriating Squall and the others, had insisted that he contact Dr. Kadowaki before he continued with his argument. She was in her office in the infirmary, her picture coming to him via the vid-link on her computer. "Dr. Kadowaki, you have still not found a physical cause for Casey's coma, have you?" Kadowaki nodded. "And her readings haven't changed, right?"

"No, they haven't. Still the same, Mr. Hallen."

Kai tapped commands into his keyboard. "I'm sending you and Squall something. I, er, hacked Casey's records out of boredom, so one is her brain wave scan. The second is Aiko's med readings when she tried to summon a GF, modified. You see, I think I know what's going on with Casey."

"What are you getting at?" Kadowaki asked.

Kai rolled the dice, as this was all theory. "I think Aileen is junctioned to Casey."

Aileen attacked again, her power a living thing that threatened to overwhelm her foes.

They battled down the street, heading for the town square, Aileen defending or avoiding every attack as she landed blows that threw Eric, Quistis, and Aiko around like rag dolls. Eric, blood running down his face from a cut over his right eye, threw herself at Aileen, Grieving Angel slashing, and he scored with a blow that hurled Aileen through the fountain at the center of the town square. Quistis cast Meltdown, hoping to lower Aileen's defenses, as Aiko cast a Thundara spell at her. The Meltdown spell did its job, as Aileen howled in pain from the relatively low level spell, and the battle continued.

Aileen accelerated, getting behind them, using raw force to drive them down the street. Windows shattered and cars were smashed by the power that Aileen used, and only their junctioned strength kept them alive. Quistis, from her back, played a card that probably wouldn't work, using the Blue Magic Degenerator. Eerie waves of what seemed to be almost solid sound played over Aileen, yet the attack, which normally dispatched a target to another place, failed. "Ooh," Aileen cooed, "that tickled."

"Well I had to try," she admitted. She cracked Save the Queen at Aileen, who dodged it by sending a flying kick at Aiko. Aiko ducked it, but she was wide open for a burst of energy that caught her in the back and sent her rolling to Quistis' feet.

Screaming in fury, Eric closed on Aileen, Grieving Angel glowing.

Aileen caught his sword in both hands and stopped him in his tracks. "Amazing. I see how attracted you are to Quistis and yet hurting the bimbo really got you mad." She tried to force Eric back, and found, to her shock, that he refused to give ground. Aileen strained against him, the white of her power field merging with the blue-white of his. "You-how can you be doing this?" she asked, bewildered. Eric did not answer, just pushed her backward with both physical strength and his field. Aileen took a blast of energy from Grieving Angel and fell into the ground, a column of blue-white marking the spot.

Quistis knelt beside of Aiko and saw that if she didn't act quickly, Aiko would die. She cast a Full-life spell on her and prayed that it would work. No one dies for me today, she thought. Aiko gasped, her eyes opening weakly. "Quistisâ€|what happenedâ€|?"

"Just rest, Aiko. You'll be all right."

"Thanksâ€|" she mumbled, eyes fluttering shut again.

Aileen had survived the attack, and stood in the center of the street, Eric before her. "I could swear your power is higher than it should be," she said to him.

"It's as high as it needs to be," he panted. "I will not give up, ever."

"Well, we got a problem, then, pretty boy. Because I won't quit either." She generated a ball of pure light between her fingers, at first the size of a basketball. It quickly grew until it was fifteen feet across, now floating above her head. "Let's see you deal with this, swordsman."

Quistis got Aiko to her feet and began looking for some cover. This isn't going to be good, she felt.

"What I noticed," Kai explained, "was this." He touched his monitor, which highlighted the thing he wished them to see on Aiko's meds. "This is the summoning signature. Lasts maybe a nanosecond. Now here's what I asked the system to do." He added the projection that he had asked the computer to simulate, and a line of gentle curves appeared. "Does that look familiar, Doctor?"

Kadowaki leaned forward and saw it at once, since Kai had helpfully put Casey's medical record in a window right beneath it. "Oh my goodness. It's the same as Casey's brain waves."

"Precisely. Aileen attacked Casey in order to force a junction with her, then forced Casey to constantly generate the summoning pattern to give herself a continuous physical presence on this plane. She has abilities that GF either don't have or don't use, and she has some kind of ability to link with minds. She must have used that to force Casey to junction."

"My God," Squall breathed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that we have to break the junction and stop the summon pattern," Kai said. "Onlyâ€|we have to destroy Aileen's current form at the same time. If we can cut her link to the sub-ether and destroy her body at the same time, it should kill her."

"Are you sure?" Squall asked.

"Of course not! But we have to try! Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Hallen?"

"You still have Casey tied to the medical network, right? You're having real-time readings sent to you constantly?" Kadowaki nodded. "Perfect. Get to her ASAP."

"But-Kai, we've never had to break a junction in this fashion before. How can we do it?"

The final piece fell in. "We can't, that's true. But you'd be amazed by all the research that Esthar has done on the subject. Research the Masters have."

Aileen threw the ball at Eric, who lifted Grieving Angel to defend himself. Quistis took a tighter grip on Aiko and jumped through the plate glass window of a near-by store as a virtual river of power ran up and down the street, destroying the stone bridges that were such a part of the local architecture. Quistis instinctively covered Aiko with her body as shrapnel from the explosions flew in. "Ouch," Aiko muttered, "get off of me, Quisty, I ain't your type."

Quistis rolled off of her and, struck by a memory, laughed. "What's so funny?" Aiko wanted to know.

"It's just that-during Squall's field exam here in Dollet, if he had avoided the enemy by entering a civilian area, it would have been a twenty point deduction."

"Good thing I'm a SeeD already." Aiko sat up and looked around wildly. "Where's Eric?"

"Out there," Quistis said, indicating the smoke filled street. "Aiko, I-I don't know if he could have survived that."

Aiko stood, a bit unsteadily, and went to the ruins of the window. Aileen was further down the block, floating above a pile of rubble in the middle of the street. "Oh, no-Eric!" she cried.

Aileen turned her way. "I will give him credit; if he hadn't took the brunt of that, I would have leveled a quarter of Dollet. He was a good soldier-and like the best soldiers, he's now dead."

Kai pulled up the files that had included the various treatments that the Masters had gotten from Esthar and, from memory, found a file he'd scanned in passing and opened it. What he was proposing to use was a treatment that was meant to unlock junctions in the rare event of combat catatonia, which was as close as they could get here. He retraced his path into the medical real-time monitoring system until he reached Casey's monitor. "Dr. Kadowaki, this is Kai. The treatment I want to use is electrical in nature-it will be conducted through the monitor sensors. Your job is to check her electrochemical balance. I don't want to fry her brain."

"Kai," the doctor called, voice only, "how long will this take?"

"If my files are right, it will take less than thirty seconds. The

problem is it will take four minutes to download the treatment to you. Here goes nothing." Kai sent the program, and realized that now he had to tell Quistis and the others to hold on for five more minutes.

"You bitch, I'm going to kill you."

Aileen seemed a bit amused to hear Quistis speak in such a fashion. "Now, Quisty, naughty, naughty. Mustn't act like you care. You should have kissed him when you had the chance."

Quistis readied herself for her last attack, her last resort, when behind Aileen the rubble began to quiver. The rocks flew apart in a blue white flash, and both women were overjoyed to see Eric, alive, albeit hurt, his jacket shredded, blood running down both arms. "You again?" Aileen shouted in frustration. "Why won't you die? Is it her! Why are you fighting for her?"

Eric gave her a wry little smile. " I like the way that long skirt hugs her hips."

"He heard that," Aiko said, embarrassed.

As Eric and Aileen faced off, Quistis had an epiphany about the two combatants. Both were refusing to be defeated, both were drawing on powers that she suspected that they did not understand, driven by forces beyond their control. They were kindred spirits, bonded by blood and warfare, destined for battle. Quistis knew what drove, to an extent, Aileen. She was scared to find out what drove Eric.

Aileen dove at him again, but he avoided her, kicking her in the back as she passed. He gripped Grieving Angel in both hands. His power field expanded, the ground shaking, as he took the greatest single chance of his life. Father, give me the strength to do what you could not.

Aileen felt the power building and part of her cringed in fear. The rest of her lusted to test it's force. "Ooh, baby," she whispered, "wish I could have met you when I was alive."

Eric shaped his field into a ball around him, arcs crackling from the blade of Grieving Angel to the ball. His face was lined with strain as he sought to control a force no man in a thousand years had used. Quistis and Aiko looked on in awe, Aiko thinking Eric, be careful. Eric cocked Grieving Angel over his shoulder and said "Die, spawn of Urizen! Nova Maelstrom!"

He released the attack, a lethal strike that crossed the distance between them and hit, Aileen using her power field to defend the attack. It looked as if she was trying to catch the attack, but in truth her energy was doing the work. She slid backward twenty yards, then another hundred as the Nova Maelstrom pushed her further back. "Damn you, Eric!" she cried as the attack overwhelmed her. The ball soared majestically down the streets of Dollet, it's might tearing at the facades of the buildings, and soared out onto the beach, where it finally struck, the blast being channeled out to sea, the horizon going white.

Aiko and Quistis ran out to Eric as he fell to one knee, Grieving

Angel supporting his weight. "Where did that come from, Eric?" Quistis wanted to know.

"It was something my father taught me. That should have done it."

As if the universe was conspiring to torment them, Kai called them. "Guys, I know how to beat Aileen!"

"Kai, stand down," Quistis said, "Eric just beat her."

"For now. She'll be back. Let me tell you what's going on." He very quickly summarized his theories on Aileen's origins and her connection to the GF and to Casey Wellon. "We're trying to break the junction with Casey right now, but we'll need another four minutes."

"So we break the junction and it's over?" Quistis asked.

"No. Without Casey, Aileen loses her hold on this world, but she can re-establish it. You have to kill her as we cut off her escape route to the sub-ether. That way her mind dies in this world."

"Geez, Kai, what do you want for an encore?" Aiko huffed.

"I can do it," Quistis asserted. "Just pray what you're trying works."

Eric was peering into the distance. "She's back. I can sense her on the beach."

"Then let's go. Eric, Aiko, you hold her off. I'm going to play my last card." She extended a hand to Aiko. "Mind doing your secret move?"

"Sounds kinky. Let's get her."

Three minutes, forty seconds:

Aileen was waiting for them on the beach as Aiko's Flash Teleport deposited them just at the base of the sea wall around the city. Eric and Aiko charged, Aiko firing a Fire spell at Aileen to cover Eric's approach. Aileen, her expression that of a cat playing with a mouse, let Eric come, using her speed to dodge all his attacks. She punched him aside and charged Aiko, who attacked bare handed, her staff long gone now. Still playing, she blocked all of Aiko's attacks with dull ease and slapped Aiko across the face.

"Three minutes," Kai called to Quistis, watching the time remaining counter on his screens.

In Balamb Garden, Dr. Kadowaki watched the same countdown run on Casey's display.

Eric slashed at Aileen's leg from behind, severing a tendon that caused her to put all her weight on one leg just as Aiko scored with a kick to the jaw. Aileen recovered, part of her wondering why Quistis had sent these two to fight for her.

Two minutes, thirty seconds:

Selphie firewalled the scramjets on the Ragnarok, desperate to reach Dollet in the event Kai Hallen's desperate plan failed. Squall and Rinoa watched, knowing that for now, they were helpless, and it came down to Kai's stolen, experimental program-and Quistis.

"Two minutes," Kai called, "one minute thirty until program activates."

Eric fell back as Aileen sent rapid fire pulses his way. He put away Grieving Angel and responded with his beam attack that Aileen merely batted aside. "That won't work, pretty boy." Aiko tried to attack from behind but Aileen simply moved to the right, causing Aiko to lose her footing. "Whoopsie, you fell down."

One minute, thirty seconds.

"Aileen!" Quistis shouted, getting her former friend's attention. "It's time that we finished this!"

"Finished what, Quisty? You can't kill me, and all of you are getting weaker. You will die for what you did to me, and then it will be over."

"You know I meant you no harm, Aileen."

"One minute," Kai breathed.

Aileen laughed and hurled a blast of power that Quistis' Shell managed to deflect. "That doesn't matter anymore, does it? I'm going to kill you."

Quistis sighed, closed her eyes, and began to build her last attack, one that would take half a minute to build. "Goodbye, Aileen. I did love you so much."

"That's what they all say."

Kai's program completed it's download and activated, commands racing at the speed of light through the monitor. Electrical pulses of specific patterns began running into Casey Wellon's mind, their purpose to interfere with the pattern that Aileen had carved into Casey's brain. Kadowaki watched as the waves began to change.

Aileen felt something tug at her very being, her very essence, as Kai counted down from fifteen in Quistis' ears. My junction-what are they doing to my junction, she thought.

As Kai counted down from ten, Quistis, tears in her eyes, noticed that Aileen was suddenly pale, wavering on her feet. "I'm so sorry. SHOCKWAVE PULSAR!" she cried.

Three, two, one.

The world went white-

Zero.

Casey Wellon's eyes snapped open and she let out a squeal that caused the doctor to start on kind. "Ouch," Casey groaned. "What

happened?"

In the last picosecond of her life, as Shockwave Pulsar destroyed her body, her link to the sub-ether closed, Aileen howled with fury, a little part of her realizing that here, in the real world, she was free from Urizen at least.

Quistis could not move as her most powerful Blue Magic rushed towards her, clearly meaning to add her life to the toll for the day. Then she felt strong hands grab her, and pull her aside, saving her, as the attack raced past her.

"Kai? It's Dr. Kadowaki! Casey is awake. Iâ€|it worked I guess!" Kai let out the breath he had been holding and decided to stick to Triple Triad for the foreseeable future.

Quistis opened her eyes and saw that she was laying beside of Eric, who had his arms around her. Well, this feels nice, she thought, reaching over to touch his cheek. "Ericâ€|I think it's over," she told him.

"It had better be," he replied, "because I'm tired." He opened his eyes, surprised at how close Quistis was to him. He rested his cheek against hers. "Really tired."

"You saved me again. That's becoming a habit."

Eric smiled. "Always a pleasure, ma' am."

"Thought I broke you of that habit," she laughed.

From behind them, Aiko cleared her throat and said "Come on, you two, get a room." She bent over and extended an arm to Eric, pulling him to his feet, he doing the same for Quistis. "Please tell me we got her."

"I hope we did," Quistis said, "for Aileen's sake."

A constellation of lights appeared on the horizon, familiar engines sounding, as Selphie brought the Ragnarok over the beach, switching to the landing engines. "Hiya Quisty!" Selphie called over the earbeads "Better late than never, huh?"

"Remind me to clobber her later," Aiko remarked to no one in particular as the Ragnarok came in for a landing, hopefully bringing the nightmare if not to a close, then to a temporary resolution.

Epilogue(1):

Eric was not all that shocked to find Quistis at the secret place that some of the cadets called the Nest, looking out into the night at Balamb Garden; it was, after all, the first place he had checked.

It had been a busy week at the Garden since they had returned from the war zone that Aileen had made of Dollet, on quite a few levels. On the diplomatic level, there had been the extensive negotiations between the Garden, Dollet, and Esthar, with President Loire finally agreeing to pay reparations to Dollet to cover the hundreds of

millions of gil in damage that the battles had caused. On the home front, Squall had gone absolutely ballistic on the Masters for being a part of what had been done to Quistis, and Eric had heard from Rinoa that there had been a rather strained conversation between Squall and Headmaster Cid over the extent of his knowledge of what had happened with Quistis. He and Aiko had not come out of it unscathed-the abilities and powers that he and Aiko had hidden from everyone being the root of it. Technically, by not revealing those skills when they had first applied to Galbadia Garden, they had broken SeeD regulations, but Squall wasn't about to get rid of fighters like them. Which was why he had come to look for Quistis. "Hello," he said, a bit amused when the three couples currently using the Nest, all at the same time, decided it was time to go. "How are you?"

Quistis did not answer for a moment. When she finally did, she said "I keep thinking about Aileen. Not the person we fought, but my friend. She's why I come up here, you know? I was using this place to remember her by. I'm afraid that all I'll ever remember of her is the monster, not my friend."

Eric took a place beside of Quistis. "Your friend died in Deling City, Quistis. Whatever happened to her in the void, in the sub-ether, destroyed your friend. I know that's easier to say than to believe, but it's true."

"You're right on both counts. So, Eric, I haven't seen you in a couple of days. What's up?"

He decided to be matter of fact. "Aiko, Kai, and me have been assigned to the Esthar Contract. Four months or completion of contract. We leave tomorrow at 0530 hours."

"Oh." Quistis was not sure how she felt about that. "Who were you assigned to?"

"The Sixth. Seifer Almasy's command."

Quistis smiled. "You under Seifer's command. That should be interesting."

"I imagine it will. Listen, Quistis," he searched for the right words, and could not find them, so he tried the direct approach. "Things got confusing last week, mixed up and emotional. But I felt something, some kind of attraction, and I kind of hoped you did too."

Quistis smiled. "I did feel something, Eric. What, I'm not sure. It was all so sudden, and I really could not trust what I was thinking then. But there was something."

"All right, well, here's what I want to say. Four months is a long time. I, well, I don't expect you to wait for something that hasn't started yet. But, if there's still something there when I come back, is that okay?"

Quistis found she liked this side of Eric, so unsure and so human. "Of course it is, Eric." She leaned against him, putting an arm around him. "I'm going to miss you, Eric."

"Me too." He put an arm around her waist, feeling her warmth against him. "I'll be careful down in Esthar."

"I would expect nothing less from my best student." She looked into his eyes. "0530 is pretty early. You need to get some rest."

"I know. I had better go."

"Before you doâ€¦" Quistis took a breath to steel herself. "Would you kiss me goodbye? If that's all right?"

Eric did not answer, he merely did what he had wanted to in Dollet, and kissed her, a light, simple, beautiful kiss. Quistis returned it, then stepped back. "You had better go before we convince ourselves to do something too soon." Eric nodded, and got in a quick kiss before he left. Quistis turned back to the night, flush with the emotions stirred by Eric's kiss. Before she could get too contemplative, she heard Aiko, her voice coming from the training center entrance, say in disbelief, "Oh, man, you actually kissed her. You big goof!" Seifer, Quistis decided, needed a healthy dose of luck with Aiko heading his way. Inspired by the words that Eric had said and more importantly by his kiss, Quistis tried to think about her friend, in the place that she had chosen to do so years ago.

Epilogue (2):

In the endless space of the Void, Urizen listened as his rival, Los, berated him for his failures.

Urizen technically outranked Los in the orders of the Dominions, yet, under the Great Mother, dissent such as this was tolerated and encouraged. "I can not believe that you wasted your time with that hybrid Aileen," Los complained. "Her very existence was a scar on the Void! And she was limited by a broken need for revenge!"

"Los, have a care. My plans are not affected by this, they are enhanced. We have scouted our enemy, probed their skills, and we know more now. And as an added bonus, we drew the Killing Hand into the field of battle. The Order is waiting for us."

Los drew his spiritual form up proudly. "You can paint this as a victory, Urizen, yet you know that it does not serve the cause of the Great Mother in any way. She would punish you if she were here."

Urizen laughed, a sound that sent nails running down the back. "The Great Mother is not here, Los. That is our problem, after all. Once she is freed, you can tell her of all my failings. Now leave my sight."

Los could not answer that argument, for it was true. "Very well, Lord Urizen. For the Great Mother!"

Los disappeared into the Void before Urizen could reply. "Yes," he hissed. "For the Great Mother. For Eden."

Urizen's laughter filled the Void.

March 16-April 30,2000

Virginia, United States

End
file.